Lust For Life: The miraculous survival of Iggy Pop

Competition: WIN a pair of Mitchell Acoustics uStream Go Bluetooth speakers

Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

Issue No. **503**

July 2023

TRACK STARS

GROUP TEST

Six high-output cartridges get a good spin... Which will sing with your vinyl?

NEWS EXTRA:

Launches from Denon, Melco, JBL, Monitor Audio and more...

PREMIER LEAGUE

Bowers & Wilkins' Pi7 S2 wireless noise-cancelling in-ears

BUYING GUIDE

100+ Essential Components p107

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FiiO's K9 Pro ESS desktop DAC/amp

It might get loud!

Our Beginner's Guide to floorstanders

NOT FADE AWAY

The dying art of the perfect song ending

BARGAIN OF THE MONTH

Cambridge Audio's MXN10 plug-and-play streamer

"THEY ALL HATE ME!"

Flashback: Eddie Van Halen goes to war with his band

"POWER AND PUNCH"

Perlisten's stunning R5m three-way standmount

£5.75

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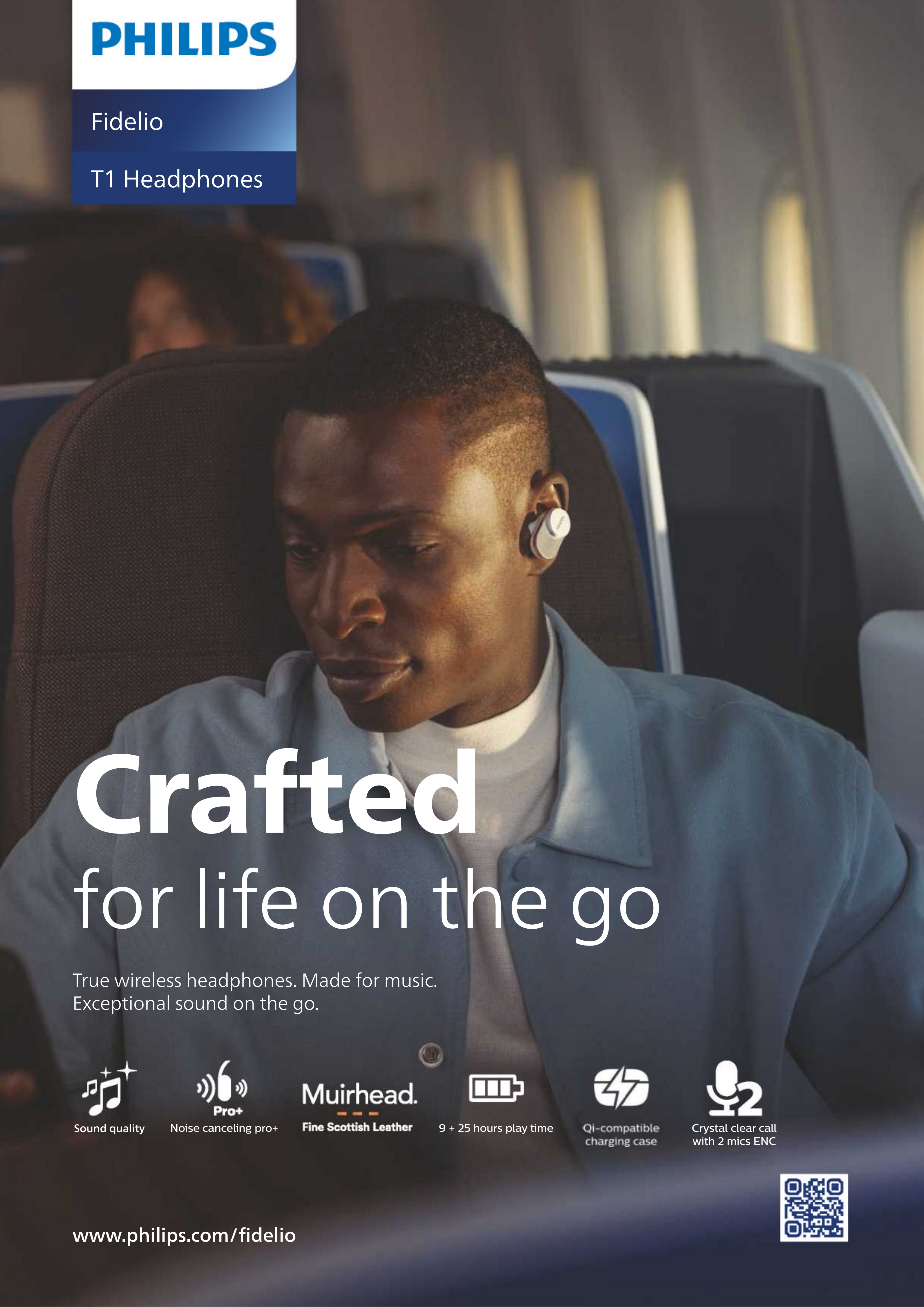
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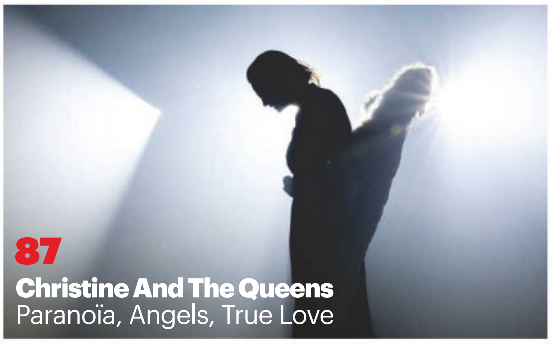

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BADGES EXPLAINED

OUR AWARDS

EDITOR'S CHOICE: Awarded to those products that are judged to deliver outstanding performance

RECOMMENDED: Products that we feel meet a high standard of performance

GROUP TEST WINNER: Comparative tests can only have one winner, and this badge says it all!

You could be a crate digger with a player in need of some sweet TLC. You could be a RSD-er on the look out for a debut deck. You could have just hauled your Eighties record collection down from the attic, but the ancient Dansette just won't do. You could be a completist with a cataloguing brain and the yen to upgrade. Whatever your role in the great vinyl revival, you could do worse than take a gander at this month's *Group Test* where we spin half a dozen top-notch, high-output carts across a wide range of musical genres to discover which might just be the playing partner of your dreams.

Elsewhere we have lots of new product, much of which was previewed at the recent Munich High-End convention. You can find all that in our *Audiofile* section. Plus, if you turn to p15, there's a chance to win a fabulous prize – a pair of Mitchell Acoustic uStream Go portable Bluetooth speakers. All you have to do is correctly answer a question pertaining to the forthcoming UK HiFi Show *Live*! which kicks off on the last weekend in September at the Ascot Racecourse, Berkshire. We're very much looking forward to seeing you there.

In the meantime, as usual, there's tons more to satisfy your hi-fi cravings right here.

Enjoy!

Steve Sutherland Editor

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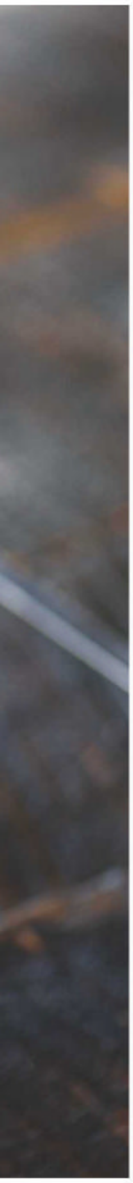

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Picture credit: Shutterstock/Andrea Raffin (Iggy Pop)
Mogwai73 (Van Halen)

Audiofile

THE LATEST INDUSTRY NEWS…

Well connected

New network player from Japan

PRICE: £1,400-£1,600 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** DENON.COM

DENON HAS RELEASED its DNP-2000NE network audio player with HEOS integration, allowing users to stream millions of high-fidelity tunes wirelessly from services such as Spotify, Tidal, Amazon Music and others. Connectivity options include wi-fi, Ethernet, USB and Bluetooth. It also supports AirPlay 2 for wireless streaming of music from compatible devices and responds to Alexa and Apple Siri voice controls. Additionally, the player has HDMI ARC, two optical and one coaxial digital inputs, as well as a USB-B in for native music streaming directly from a computer. The Bluetooth transmission functionality allows connection to Bluetooth headphones for wireless personal listening.

The DNP-2000NE comes equipped with Denon's Advanced AL32 Processing Plus, supporting up-sampling to 32-bit/384kHz. The player also features four high-precision 32-bit/384kHz ES9018K2M DACs configured in a double-differential-mode, derived from the flagship DCD-A110.

The DNP-2000NE measures 434 x 107 x 421mm (WxHxD) including antenna, weighs 9.7kg and comes in a Black and Premium Silver finish for £1,400 or Graphite Silver for £1,600. ▶

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Get to the point

Flagship moving-magnet cartridge

PRICE: £145-£200 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** GOLDRING.CO.UK

GOLDRING HAS RELEASED its new flagship E Series moving-magnet cartridge, the E4 which the company says has been designed to be the ultimate upgrade for any modern budget or midrange turntable. Compatible with all medium-to-high-mass tonearms, it has been constructed using the same high-quality core as the other E Series models in the range. Goldring explains that the E4 is positioned to serve those who wish to upgrade an obsolete cartridge in its entirety or those who want to boost the performance of their existing E Series cart by replacing the stylus.

The E4's new super-elliptical nude diamond stylus features what Goldring says is: "lower effective tip mass, improved rigidity and better high-frequency detail retrieval than 'bonded' elliptical alternatives". It measures 7.6 x 18 microns and is cut and polished from a single homogeneous piece of diamond.

To complement its low tip-mass stylus, the E4 features a hollow aluminium cantilever tube. Goldring says: "the light weight and superior stiffness of the material allows the stylus to trace medium-to-high frequencies with greater accuracy, while simultaneously reducing distortion and mis-tracking".

It also features Magnetic Duplex Technology, which means stereo information is contained in a single 'V'-shaped groove that has perpendicular sidewalls angled at 45°. The company claims that: "conventional cartridges, which use a single large magnet interacting with two vertically mounted coils (one for left-channel information, one for right) to extract a stereo signal from the groove, can permit high levels of crosstalk – and consequently only a modest amount of left and right-channel separation. E4 uses Goldring's Magnetic Duplex Technology that positions two low-mass magnets at the same angles as the coils – so each magnet interacts only with its partnering coil. This allows the E4 to transcribe the information in the groove more accurately and results in greater stereo separation and a more accurate soundstage."

The E4 moving-magnet cartridge is priced at £200, the E4 stylus at £145. ▶

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Moveable feasts

New portable speakers from the US

PRICE: £230-£550 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** UK.JBL.COM

TWO JBL PORTABLE speakers have been upgraded with wi-fi connectivity. The Boombox 3 Wi-Fi and Charge 5 Wi-Fi not only bring signature JBL sound via Bluetooth, but also come with high-quality audio streaming and additional wi-fi capabilities.

The company explains: "Self-tuning automatically detects when you're in a new environment, so you know the sound will be optimised, no matter if you're listening in or outdoors. With AirPlay 2, Alexa MRM and Chromecast built-in over wi-fi, connect and stream from your favourite music service."

The Charge 5 Wi-Fi offers a quoted 20 hours of playback, while the Boombox 3 Wi-Fi claims 24 hours. The Boombox 3 Wi-Fi is also the first JBL portable speaker with Dolby Atmos for a more spatial and immersive sound experience.

Going for gold

The new speakers both come in a black finish with gold details and both cabinet casings are made from 90 percent post-consumer recycled plastic, while the speaker grille is made from 100 percent recycled fabric. The packaging is made from FSC-certified paper and printed with soy ink. Both enclosures are water and dustproof.

The JBL Boombox 3 Wi-Fi is a three-way speaker system consisting of subwoofer, two midrange drivers and two tweeters, while the JBL Charge 5 Wi-Fi boasts an excursion driver and a separate tweeter with two passive bass radiators. For additional connectivity and functionality, there's the JBL One app.

The JBL Boombox 3 Wi-Fi is priced at £230, the Charge 5 Wi-Fi at £550.

The harder they come...

HDD digital music library from Japan

PRICE: £7,500 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** MELCO-AUDIO.COM ADMM.UK.COM

FOLLOWING THE MARCH introduction of Melco's flagship digital music library, the SSD-based N1-S38, the Japanese company has announced the new N5-H50, which draws heavily from the N1 and introduces an HDD along with simplified features.

Features shared with the N1-S38 flagship include its design, platform, chassis, casework and mainboard. The company says the N5-H50 gains an extreme grade of low-jitter system clock from NDK, industrial quality RJ45 connectors for Melco's trademark LAN port and dedicated PLAYER port, plus SFP Fibre (Small Form Factor Pluggable) connectivity, allowing the use of noise-isolating optical connectivity with SFP-ready devices or Melco's entry-level S100/2 and flagship S10 data switches.

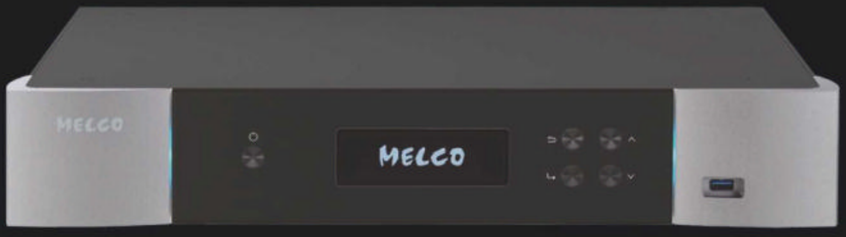
USB connectivity is via Amphenol connectors at the rear and an additional front panel USB socket is included for convenience. USB formatting is both USB 2.0 for audiophile-grade DACs and USB 3.0 for higher speed data transfers, such as CD importing with Melco's dedicated D100 drive/ripper or expansion storage.

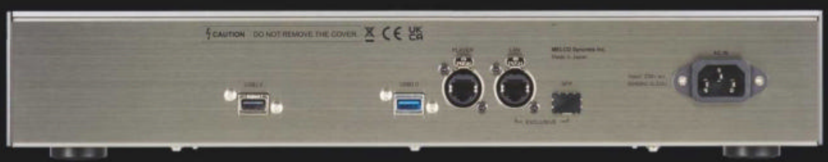
Ground force

A high-performance power connection is also specified, using an EMC-filtered IEC connector giving true system ground reference. The N5-H50's power supply uses multi-stage linear regulation following a high-spec audio-grade toroidal transformer on a special vibration-cushion mount.

Hand-made in Japan, the N5-H50's precision-machined two-tone metalwork draws from the industrial design of the N1-S38 and benefits from what Melco calls a highly stable chassis construction centred around a 3mm stainless steel base plate intended to minimise unwanted vibration.

The new fascia design features the Melco logo, illuminated positive-click fascia control buttons, an OLED display panel, plus concealed shadow lighting – which changes colour in response to machine status. The N5-H50 comes in black or silver.





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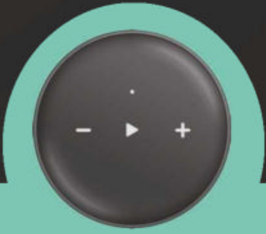

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Teenage kicks

A new handy recorder

PRICE: £1,300 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** TEENAGE.ENGINEERING SOUNDTECH.CO.UK

GOOD NEWS FOR prospective podcasters and roving reporters, Teenage Engineering has launched the TP-7 field recorder – a dedicated recording device with a seven-hour rechargeable battery and 128GB of internal storage.

Designed to record music and interviews with: "zero friction in the highest possible quality," at the centre of the TP-7 is a motorised 'tape reel' used to navigate menus, while the rocker on the left allows the user to scrub through audio. The mode button is below and the other side houses the memo and navigation controls. The ergonomic placement of each function is designed to allow for single-handed operation.

For the record

There is a built-in microphone plus three stereo two-way jacks to connect external mics, headphones, studio monitors or audio equipment. Connection via USB-C allows the TP-7 to be used as a multi-channel audio interface, midi controller or for data transfer and charging. Wireless connectivity options include MiFi and Bluetooth Low Energy (BLE). The package bundles a 6.35mm-to-3.5mm jack adaptor.

Also available is the TP-7 transcription app for instant voice-to-text: the user connects via BLE or USB and imports audio for instant transcription. The software uses Whisper, the open source ai. ▶

Look to the future

New music player and in-ears from A&K

PRICE: £1,900-£4,200 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** ASTELLKERN.CO.UK

ASTELL&KERN HAS LAUNCHED two new products – the A&futura SE300 digital music player and its AURA earphones.

The A&futura SE300 is the fourth model in the A&futura range, built with an ultra-refined R-2R DAC, instead of the Delta-Sigma converter most commonly used in audio players of this kind. The company explains that the R-2R DAC is also known as a Ladder DAC as it arranges resistors in a ladder form, offering what it claims is a natural sound with unrivalled dynamism. It supports WAV, FLAC, WMA, MP3, OGG, APE, AAC, ALAC, AIFF, DFF and DSF while its Bluetooth is V5.0 (aptX HD and LDAC).

The SE300 comes with a Dual AMP mode Class A and Class AB amplification. It also features TERATON ALPHA, A&K's own tech designed to produce audio playback: "as close to the original sound as possible through effective power noise removal, efficient power management and unwavering amplification". Crafted from a blend of aluminium and stainless steel, the A&futura SE300 has a polished right side with a triangular-patterned backlit volume wheel while the rear glass has a new etching pattern and the bottom section curves outward for a more ergonomic grip.

There's a redesigned Crimson-theme UI/UX and the new interface comes with an album art search function. It measures 76 x 139 x 18mm (WxHxD), weighs circa 317g, boasts 12 hours battery usage and 3.5 hours recharging. It comes in platinum silver and is priced at £1,900.

All the eights...

The AURA in-ear is a collaboration with Vision Ears, a pioneer of in-ear systems based in Germany, and come with two 8mm low dynamic drivers, eight balanced armature drivers and a balanced armature super tweeter. A&K claims a five-way crossover with special circuitry avoids excessive load from the tweeter towards the source, resulting in extended and harmonic highs.

The company says the AURAs are built with a unique isobaric configuration with two 8mm dynamic drivers facing each other to effectively double the output volume. A special chamber with a pinpoint internal volume is also included to maximise audio precision while the aluminium acoustic mesh has been designed to circulate air efficiently and control the power of the dynamic drivers.

The 'phones are cased in a high-grade Swiss aluminium, corrosion-resistant shell with a hand-polished surface and Vision Ears' own custom warm grey colour. At the front, the custom dark bronze faceplate features precision-tailored micro grooves – which have been treated to prevent oxidisation.

The AURAs come with an Effect Audio Custom Cable (4.4mm, 3.5mm), leather carry case, leather earphone pocket, leather cable clip, suede cleaner, six pairs of AZLA SE1500 Tips (SS/S/SM/M/ML/L), four pairs of mesh filters, a quick start guide, warranty card and serial number card. It's priced at £4,200.

Difference In sound Quality
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WIN Mitchell Acoustics uStream Go speakers!

"IF YOU WANT high-quality stereo sound and good battery life then there are few Bluetooth portable speakers that can rival the miniature powerhouse that is the uStream Go."

So said our review in last month's issue. And now you can find out for yourself courtesy of Mitchell Acoustics. The company is offering a pair of uStream Go's worth £350 to the first reader out of the editor's cocked hat with the correct answer to the following question:

Where does the UK Hi-Fi Show *Live* take place between 29 September and 1 October this year?

- ⓐ **Goodwood**
- ⓑ **Ascot**
- ⓒ **Aintree**

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To enter go to www.hifichoice.com/competition

Volt from the blues

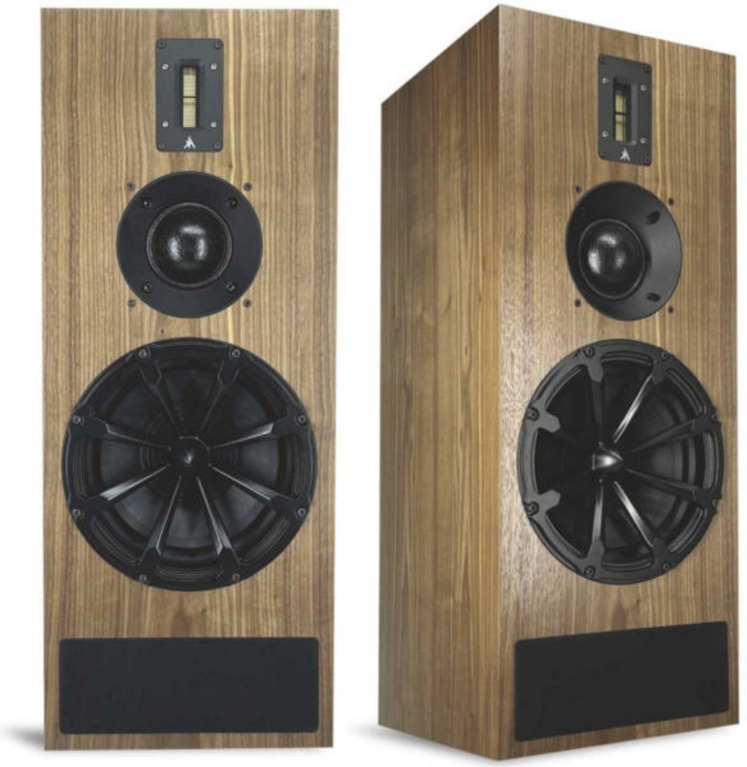
High-end standmount from Cambridge

PRICE: £20,000-£22,000 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
WEB: KERRACOUSTIC.COM

UK company Kerr Acoustic has launched its new K200 three-way standmount loudspeaker. Built exclusively from 24mm Baltic birch plywood, it features the company's unique transmission line loading and a combination of drivers including a brand new 254mm Radial bass driver from Dorset-based Volt, which is married with a 76mm, low-distortion domed fabric midrange driver and 60mm true ribbon tweeter.

Sensitivity is quoted as 91dB (8ohm) and a pair of 4mm copper five-way binding posts are located on the rear panel. The cabinets measure 310 x 755 x 460mm (WxHxD), weigh 43kg each and come in a range of real-wood veneer finishes, including Oak, Walnut and Rosenut, as well as either satin or high-gloss lacquer in any RAL colour, all with magnetic grilles. Custom stands are available separately at £2,000 per pair.

Pricing is as follows: Real-wood veneer £20,000, Satin lacquer £20,100, High gloss lacquer £21,500 and High gloss veneer £22,000.



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Norse mode

Swinging retro portable speaker from Denmark

PRICE: £900-£1,000 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** BANG-OLUFSEN.COM

BANG & OLUFSEN has launched a new Sixties-influenced portable speaker, the Beosound A5. Designed in collaboration with Danish-Italian design duo GamFratesi, it comes in two colourways – natural aluminium with a woven paper fibre front incorporating a light oak handle and a black anthracite aluminium version paired with a dark oak wood speaker cover and handle.

Boasting more than 12 hours of playtime and a wireless phone charger integrated into the top panel of the cabinet, B&O says the Beosound A5 is its most versatile and powerful speaker to date, controlled by either a user-interface or directly from the Bang & Olufsen App. It incorporates a four-way driver setup with four digital amplifiers providing a combined 280W of power via a 133mm bass driver, pair of 51mm midrange drivers and 19mm tweeter.

Beosound A5 is compatible with Beolink Multiroom, Airplay 2, Chromecast, Spotify Connect and Bluetooth 5.2.

The Nordic Weave version is priced at £900, the Dark Oak at £1,000. ▶

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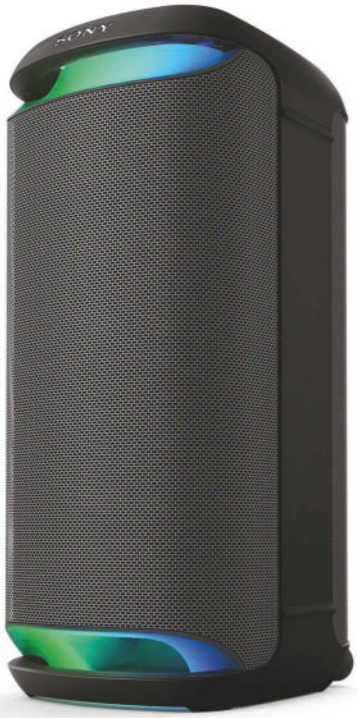
PRICE: £600 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** SONY.CO.UK



SONY HAS UNVEILED its new SRS-XV800 omnia-directional speaker, featuring five tweeters in dual X-Balanced speaker units with what it describes as: "almost rectangular diaphragms that not only maximise the area of the speaker diaphragm, but also increase sound pressure for deeper and punchier bass, less distortion and greater vocal clarity for a richer, clearer and more rewarding listening experience".

The built-in battery claims up to 25 hours of listening time with three more hours from 10 minutes of charging. The design features built-in wheels and a handle while indirect illumination produces ambient light, which automatically syncs to the beat and rhythm of the music.

It also includes Sony's TV Sound Booster, a karaoke and guitar input, illuminated touch panel, is water resistant IPX4 rated and works with Bluetooth Fast Pair for Android.

Compatible with Sony/Music Center apps, the SRS-XV800 allows the user to select playlists, change lighting patterns and sound modes while the Fiestable app is available to accommodate making playlists and karaoke functions such as Voice Changer and Echo, plus DJ control to add sound effects. ▶

Power to the people!

Glorious, bank account-busting flagship speaker

PRICE: £70,000 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
WEB: MONITORAUDIO.COM

FOR THE MILLIONAIRES among us, Monitor Audio has launched its most powerful loudspeaker to date: the Hyphn, featuring the company's 'M-Array' single high-frequency transducer surrounded by six 50mm midrange drivers. This adopts a new third-generation Micro Pleated Diaphragm III (MPD III) tweeter, which also appears in the company's Platinum Series 3G floorstander.

The six 50mm midrange drivers feature Monitor Audio's Rigid Diaphragm Technology III (RDT III) cones, which were first introduced last year. The M-Array is located squarely between Hyphn's twin pillars, each of which houses a pair of 203mm bass drivers, facing inwards, in a force-cancelling configuration – which Monitor Audio claims results in: "almost no vibration force from the drivers, either within themselves or being passed into the cabinet". Large diameter under hung voice coils are used in a bid to reduce harmonic distortion for high-impact bass performance.

Brace yourselves

The cabinet is constructed in thermoformed, precision-milled mineral and acrylic stone to create a rigid structure. With built-in formed, port tubes, strengthening ribs and bracing, boasting internal and external wall thickness of 13mm up to 25mm for bracing around the force-cancelling bass drivers, Monitor Audio claims the cabinet is almost completely vibration free.

With a claimed sensitivity of 85dB into 4ohm loads, Hyphn comes in a choice of three finishes: Pure Satin White, Matte Black and Matte Heritage Green.

More than trad, Dad

Two new speakers from MF

PRICE: £2,350-£4,100 **AVAILABLE:** SUMMER 2023 **WEB:** MUSICALFIDELITY.COM HENLEYAUDIO.CO.UK

MUSICAL FIDELITY IS launching two new standmount speakers in the Summer – the LS3/5A and LS5/9. The two-way LS3/5A was originally designed for listening places where space is limited and the goal was a linear frequency response down to 100Hz. It boasts a closed-type cabinet and the company claims: “the midrange is extremely detailed and realistic… the soundstage and imaging of vocals and instruments is truly extraordinary”.

Designed to work best in a near/mid-field listening distance between 2m and 4m away from the listener, it features a 110mm cone mid/bass driver, a 19mm dome tweeter and claimed sensitivity of 82.5dB (15ohm). The 12mm birch plywood cabinet measures 190 x 305 x 165mm (WxHxD), weighs 4.9kg per speaker and is priced at £2,350 per pair.

Meanwhile, the LS5/9 is a two-way bass reflex speaker originally designed for recording studio applications. The cabinet is made of 9mm birch plywood with a cherry veneer finish, it has a 210mm cone mid/bass driver, 34mm tweeter with phase correction and claims 89dB (8ohm) sensitivity. It measures 275 x 460 x 285mm, weighs 12kg per cabinet and costs £4,100. ▶

MUSICAL FIDELITY
MUSICAL FIDELITY

Three and easy

Celebratory saving on anniversary turntable

PRICE: £900 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** REGA.CO.UK

CELEBRATING A LANDMARK in its history, Rega has announced the release of the Planar 3 50th Anniversary Edition, a turntable package that's been specially developed to maximise the performance of the original Planar 3 (*HFC* 411).

Available in a new walnut effect finish, the 50th anniversary Planar 3 is supplied with a Neo power supply unit MK2 hand-tuned to the motor to accurately set speed and minimise vibration while a handmade Exact moving-magnet cart comes factory fitted. The drive system uses the company's reference drive belt and a custom CNC'd aluminium drive pulley (as used on the Planar 6, *HFC* 427). The Anniversary Edition is finished off with a custom aluminium lid, plinth badge and smoked dustcover.

Other features include an RB330 precision tonearm and 12mm float glass Opti-white platter. While the company is not limiting numbers of the Anniversary Edition, orders will cease to be taken after December at the end of this year.

Rega says the Anniversary Edition has been priced with a saving of £269 compared with purchasing a standard PL3 with Exact, reference drive belt and Neo PSU ("this price is the equivalent of getting the Neo PSU for free and small discount on the upgraded Reference drive belt!").

rega
50
PLANAR 3

Evolutionary

New British CD transport

PRICE: £1,000 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
WEB: CAMBRIDGEAUDIO.COM

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO HAS unveiled its Evo CD, a high performance compact disc transport the company says was developed to fit with the brand's series of Evo all-in-one components.

The custom-developed CD player uses a S5 Servo, which Cambridge claims offers better error correction and faster disc detection, and it also displays album art via the StreamMagic app.

The chassis is built from the same premium materials as the rest of the range with a metal drawer and black aluminium top panel, available with brushed wooden or matte black side panels made from sustainable Richlite material.

The Evo compact disc transport measures 317 x 89 x 352mm (WxHxD) and weighs 5.3kg.

How we test

Hi-Fi Choice employs the most methodical test and measurement regime in the business. Here's how we do it...

Unique group tests

Our *Group Tests* are supported by rigorous and exhaustive listening tests carried out by experts

HIGH-OUTPUT PHONO CARTRIDGES GROUP TEST

EACH CARTRIDGE IS run-in using Clearaudio's Cartridge Break In Test Record on our reference ISOkinetik Modular 1.5 turntable with a Jelco SA-750 tonearm fitted with a rosewood and magnesium headshell. This record has special locked grooves of pink noise, allowing the user to simply drop the needle into the groove and leave it for hours to effectively run-in your cartridge of choice. Pink noise has random noise with equal energy per octave, unlike white noise which has equal noise intensity per octave. Pink noise therefore has more low-frequency components than white noise and is great for running-in a cartridge, including the cantilever support assembly.

In order to ensure complete consistency across all of the listening tests, each cartridge is first auditioned using some reference tracks that are very familiar to me. This helps to fully identify the individual characteristics of each cartridge. Armed with this background information, I then play the same four pieces of test music listed opposite using each of the cartridges and then carefully note down any observations about the performance of them for each piece of music. Wider testing is additionally carried out with other music. This enables more meaningful comparisons to be made and ultimately helps highlight each cartridge's strengths and weaknesses.

TEST MUSIC

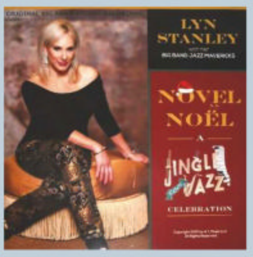
DON RENDELL IAN CARR QUINTET
Blue Mosque/Latin Blue
Shades Of Blue

SHADES OF BLUE
DON RENDELL IAN CARR QUINTET

TREVOR PINNOCK
Partita No.1/Partita No.2
JS Bach 6 Partitas

J.S. BACH · 6 PARTITAS
TREVOR PINNOCK
ARCHIV

LYN STANLEY
It's Magic/The Way You Look Tonight
Novel Noël



NATIONAL SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
España/Capriccio Espagnol
España

ESPAÑA
BIZET
CHABRIER
RIMSKY KORSAKOV
The National Symphony Orchestra

REFERENCE SYSTEM

LOUDSPEAKERS: Falcon Acoustics IMF200 **£3,300** ***HFC* 482**

This transmission line floorstander features the legendary KEF B139 bass driver, B110 midrange unit and T27 tweeter. The speakers are connected to the valve monoblocks with Russ Andrews Kimber 4TC speaker cable.

AMPLIFIER AND PHONO STAGE: World Audio Design 300BPSE monoblocks, Pre III preamp, Phono III phono stage **£5,500**

The amplifiers have been upgraded with audiophile components, including the capacitors, Charcroft resistors in the stepped attenuator of the preamp, and silver internal wiring. All the valves are premium Psvane and the four 300B output triodes are Audio Note 4300E (300B) valves.

TURNTABLE: ISOkinetik Modular 1.5 **£700** ***HFC* 371**

The turntable is powered from a Heed Orbit 2 power supply and partnered with a Jelco SA-750 tonearm. The tonearm has been re-wired with silver tonearm wire and is fitted with a rosewood and magnesium headshell. The connections to the cartridge in the headshell are also silver.

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"...undoubtedly a technically clever loudspeaker, but engineered for one simple goal – making great-sounding music..."

S7t, Hi Fi News, April 2022

hi-finews OUTSTANDING PRODUCT

"Like its S7t sibling, it excels when it comes to mid and high details, resolving the most subtle of musical moments and nailing the feel and tone of instruments...It all sounded wonderfully three-dimensional."

S4b, Hi Fi News, June 2022

hi-finews OUTSTANDING PRODUCT

"For those who like to close their eyes during listening, the R7ts are heaven sent. Put another way: as Knopfler's Schecter Strat gave way to the piano toward the track's end, I started to well up. It really was that good."

R7t, Hi Fi News August 2022

hi-finews OUTSTANDING PRODUCT

"Perlisten brings exceptional levels of detail and nuance to movies and music, underpinned by rock-solid lows. Lush looks and outstanding build quality make this series even more of a winner."

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EISA AWARD 40th ANNIVERSARY
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HIGH-OUTPUT PHONO CARTRIDGES £550-£900

Vinyl countdown

Neville Roberts takes six high-quality cartridges that will work with moving-magnet phono stages for a spin

WHEN CONSIDERING HIGH-END cartridges, people instinctively gravitate towards moving-coil designs. However, some phono stages can only accept the higher output and impedance input provided by moving-magnet or moving-iron cartridges, and a moving-coil transformer or preamp would also have to be purchased in order to use an MC model. Another issue is that some users prefer a removable stylus assembly for easy replacement. Having said that, many high-performance MMs don't have customer-replaceable stylus assemblies. What we have for you this month is six of the very best high-output cartridges that money can buy, which should all be an excellent match for your turntable and at home in some of the finest tonearms. Apart from some moving-magnet designs, there are a couple of other types that are intended to work with MM phono stages. To find out how they fare and whether or not moving-magnet, moving-coil or moving-iron reigns supreme, read on...

▶

MoFi
GRADO
JM
NAGAOKA
JT-80
NAGAOKA
Groove Runner 5

ON TEST

Goldring
Eroica HX £600 p28
With a name that translates as Heroic in Italian, can the only high-output, moving-coil offering in the group live up to its billing?

Grado
Timbre Sonata3
£630 p30
Grado claims an impactful, warm and accurate sound, with more control and accuracy than ever for the only moving-iron here

MoFi Electronics
MasterTracker £800 p32
MoFi's carts are designed by looking at where a record starts: on the cutting lathe, but how does the group's first moving-magnet offering fare?

NAGAOKA
JT-80

Nagaoka
JT-80BK £550 p34
Positioned right at the very top of the Japanese company's JT range, this elegant-looking, all-black cartridge flies the moving-magnet flag

Sumiko
Amethyst £630 p36
Claimed to be "shockingly quiet and as transparent as can be," will this moving-magnet cart prove to be the jewel in the Sumiko crown?

Vertere
Sabre £900 p38
The British company's premium moving-magnet offering, can this hand-built cart deliver Vertere's claim of "uncompromised musical experience"?

Hi-Fi Choice
RECOMMENDED

Goldring
Eroica HX £600

Intended to make the upgrade from MM to MC easy, enter the only moving-coil offering in the group

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Goldring Eroica HX

ORIGIN
High-output, moving-coil cartridge

TYPE
UK

WEIGHT
5.2g

FEATURES
- Pocan body
- Stylus tip: Gyger II
- Tracking force: 1.5g-2g

DISTRIBUTOR
Armour Home

Goldring started life in Berlin in 1906 when two Czech brothers, Heinrich and Julius Scharf, began to build parts for the nascent gramophone industry. Goldring moved to England in 1933, and 20 years later when the company was officially renamed Goldring Manufacturing (GB) Ltd, it had developed revolutionary and highly successful magnetic pick-ups such as the Goldring 500. This cartridge was widely used by the BBC and had a turnover 33/45rpm double sapphire stylus and was considered to be the first hi-fi cartridge with a low dynamic mass. During the Fifties, the company teamed up with Swiss turntable manufacturer Lenco to form a partnership that would last 20 years.

By the Seventies, advances in magnetic materials allowed the now Goldring Products Limited to fit tiny, powerful magnets directly onto the upper end of the cantilever to form some of the first moving-magnet cartridges. More recently, thanks to a resurgence in the popularity of vinyl throughout the early 2010s, a new market has emerged, and the Eroica HX is one of the cartridges from the company aimed at turntable users wanting to make the move from moving-magnet to moving coil.

The Eroica HX employs numerous ultra-fine enamelled-copper windings to provide a sufficiently high output to work with moving-magnet phono inputs, without compromising the low crosstalk that moving-coil designs tend to offer. The armature is a pure-iron cross design, which is considered by Goldring to provide improved separation of the left and right stereo channels, compared with a moving-magnet alternative. The diamond stylus has a five-micron playing radius, which the company says will trace frequencies as high as 50kHz without distortion. Given the delicacy of this mechanism, the stylus is obviously not user-replaceable. The whole mechanism is encased in a light and rigid body formed from a polymer called Pocan (polybutylene terephthalate to be precise).

Sound quality

The wonderful blues of *Blue Mosque* from the *Shades Of Blue* LP are very tuneful and involving with the Eroica cartridge. The music really draws me into the performance from the outset. The saxophone in particular is extremely vivid and clear, and the timing and pace of the quintet is spot-on throughout. One small issue I have is that the instruments seem to be mainly on the left and right, rather than having a more even spread across the soundstage.

Some may consider that the harpsichord is nothing but a very simple-sounding instrument that produces a sawtooth waveform, but the Goldring cartridge manages to draw out all the musical detail from Bach's *Partita No.1*. The great playing by Trevor Pinnock makes the instrument really sing in my system. The realism is great and all of the subtleties of the harpsichord, from the plucking of the strings to the changes in stops, are all very clearly heard.

The Eroica produces crystal clear brass on Lyn Stanley's *The Way You Look Tonight* without any edginess or harshness. Stanley's vocals have a forward and slightly to the right presentation with this cartridge.

> **The music really draws me into the performance from the outset**

The clarity of each musician in the orchestra of Chabrier's *España* is also pleasingly evident. The music is immediately involving and sounds very real in my listening room. The detail of all the instruments is brought out well by the cartridge and the overall performance is extremely clear throughout.

The Goldring Eroica HX is a detailed and transparent-sounding cartridge and certainly lives up to its name, delivering some heroic performances. Installation is easy and it has very good tracking ability. Overall, it offers a neutral tonal balance and delivers well across all the different types of music ●

▶

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★½

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★½

FEATURES
★★★★★

LIKE: Detailed and transparent sound; works perfectly with MM phono stage

DISLIKE: Imaging can sometimes be from the left and right

WE SAY: A great way to experience MC without having to get a new phono stage

OVERALL
★★★★★

Every note. Every word.
Every detail.
LS50 Wireless II

LS50 Wireless II - The Ultimate Wireless HiFi

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WIRELESS STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKERS
KEF LS50 Wireless II

Hi-Fi Choice
RECOMMENDED

Authorised Retailers

Listen and believe

KEF

Grado
Timbre Sonata3 £630

Next up, a rather attractive wooden-bodied moving-iron offering from the Untied States

▶ DETAILS

PRODUCT
Grado Timbre Sonata3

ORIGIN
High-output, moving-iron cartridge

TYPE
USA

WEIGHT
9g

FEATURES
- Australian jarrah wood body
- Stylus tip: nude elliptical diamond
- Tracking force: 1.6g-1.9g

DISTRIBUTOR
Analogue Seduction

Originally a watchmaker, Joseph Grado first turned his hand to making phono cartridges in Brooklyn, New York in the early Fifties. When he discovered hi-fi, he visited the legendary Saul Marantz to get help to improve the sound of his audio system. In 1953, when hand-built cartridge production had exceeded the limits of his kitchen table, he founded Grado Laboratories. Initially, he also produced speakers, turntables and wooden tonearms. However, by 1963, all of his resources were dedicated to creating phono cartridges. Grado claims to have invented the stereo moving-coil cartridge and holds more than 48 patents. He was inducted into the Audio Hall of Fame in 1982.

Formerly known as the Statement and Reference Series, the Timbre range combines all of the company's midrange wooden carts into a single family. These are designed to produce a warm, impactful and accurate sound. While similar to its younger sibling in a few aspects, the Sonata3 has a much longer build time since it undergoes some intricate processes that only a few of the company's products experience. These are intended to result in a far more colourful and deeper sound quality.

The body of the cartridge is made from jarrah – a mahogany-like wood from the eucalyptus marginata tree, which is endemic to the South-West of Australia. The company claims that this wooden housing has the ability to dampen and control the resonant frequencies, and this has been achieved through various thermal aging processes. Incidentally, the cartridge is supplied with a matching wooden stylus guard that clips onto the body with tiny gold pins – rather a nice touch.

> It comes across with great musicality and the timing of all the instruments is spot on

For the generator, Grado uses the company's Flux-Bridge twin magnet system. It has modified its five-piece Optimised Transmission Line cantilever technology to achieve a 5 percent tip mass reduction compared with its Prestige series. The coils are wound from ultra-high purity long crystal (UHPLC) oxygen-free copper wire. At the other end of the cantilever is a nude elliptical diamond specially designed by Grado.

Sound quality

Firstly, I must mention that some may find the wooden body quite big in their headshell and its relatively large size makes cueing of the stylus a bit tricky. Also, when setting up the cartridge, I have to be very careful when adjusting the VTA (vertical tracking angle). Grado recommends that the front of the cartridge body should be at a right angle to the record surface, or 2° tilted back. I prefer to set the VTA by listening to the cartridge, and this one is quite sensitive to finding the correct position where all the instruments snap into focus. I find that the best tracking force is 1.8g in my tonearm, which also has an effect on the VTA. Once the cartridge is set up properly, *Latin Blue* from the *Shades Of Blue* LP comes across with great musicality and the timing of all the instruments is spot on. The piano backing balances well with the brightness of the brass instruments, while the drums are tight and punchy.

The stately *Sarabande* in JS Bach's *Partita No.1* has a commanding elegance, and with this movement I can hear all the detail of the plucking of the strings of the harpsichord.

The overall performance of Lyn Stanley's *It's Magic* is refined, effortless and very detailed. In particular, her vocals are clean and very brightly presented.

The Grado cartridge presents a full and lively sound from the National Symphony Orchestra's *Capriccio Espagnol* recording, even during the crescendos, and I have a real sense of being there in front of the orchestra. It has a bright top-end, which some may consider a little too bright at times. The bass is tight and well controlled throughout testing ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★½

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★½

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★☆

FEATURES
★★★★½

LIKE: Full, tight and bright sound

DISLIKE: Large body makes it hard to see stylus tip for cueing

WE SAY: Properly setup, the Sonata3 delivers a bright top end and a tight and punchy bass

OVERALL
★★★★½

Pro-Ject
AUDIO SYSTEMS

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The X2 B is a luxury high-end turntable that can push your musical enjoyment to new limits thanks to Pro-Ject's True Balanced Connection concept. It features a high-quality moving coil cartridge and balanced output option for class-leading convenience and sonic superiority.

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VINYL SYSTEM
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hi-finews OUTSTANDING PRODUCT
August 2022

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MoFi Electronics MasterTracker £800

The group's first moving-magnet offering is another US export with a connection to the record-making business

DETAILS

PRODUCT MoFi MasterTracker

ORIGIN High-output, moving-magnet cartridge

TYPE USA

WEIGHT 9.7g

FEATURES
- Aluminium body
- Stylus tip: Micro-Line
- Tracking force: 1.8g-2.2g

DISTRIBUTOR Karma AV

Drawing on over 40 years of making records at Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab, the MoFi Electronics division is focused on improving the sonic integrity of audio reproduction in the home. The American company's products are the result of decades of experience in the studio and multiple collaborations with some of the world's best audio designers.

The design of all MoFi cartridges begins with looking at where record production starts, ie: at the cutting lathe. The cutting head of a typical lathe consists of two coils positioned at 45° from horizontal (and therefore at 90° with respect to each other). Incidentally, the cutting stylus for a lacquer disc is usually a heated ruby, and this stylus is replaced after 10-20 hours of operation. The MasterTracker is the top of the company's Tracker series of cartridges, which also includes the StudioTracker and the UltraTracker (*HFC* 434). The MasterTracker features a V-Twin dual-magnet generator, which mirrors the layout of the cutting head that originally makes a record's grooves. The cartridge employs two powerful and low-mass magnets aligned in a V formation and parallel with the record surface. The generator coils are made from pure Ohno continuous-cast copper coils. The body of the cartridge is made from a well-damped, billet aluminium body that has been specifically designed to control resonances in order to provide a tight and accurate bass reproduction.

The tapered cantilever is fitted with a Micro-Line stylus tip. As with the Vertere Sabre overleaf, the stylus is not customer-replaceable. The Micro-Line diamond stylus, which is shaped like the cutting head of a record lathe, is designed to precisely trace the walls of the vinyl groove.

Sound quality

Listening to the Don Rendell and Ian Carr Quintet, the bossa nova rhythm of *Latin Blue* has a wonderful realism and clarity in my listening room. The presence of the saxophone and trumpet is particularly impressive.

Trevor Pinnock's rendition of JS Bach's *Partita No.2* displays a lot of clarity and detail in the stately opening and then moves swiftly to the tuneful and cheerful main section. The harpsichord has superb detail when played with the MoFi cartridge, as well as a real presence and there is no lack of the low-level detail that you often get with moving magnets. The harmonics of each individual note during the louder crescendos show no sign of muddiness, especially when the opening *Sinfonia* progresses into the energetic section. I have heard this section sounding like a cacophony of noise in the past, rather than the tuneful assembly of notes that I enjoy with the MasterTracker.

Winding up the turntable speed to 45rpm to spin the Lyn Stanley LP, the focus and clarity of her vocals in *It's Magic* are both excellent with the MoFi cartridge, and the soundstage is expansive. Having said that, the instruments are not quite as rich as I am used to hearing from this recording and the top-end does feel a tad cold to my ears.

There is no lack of the low-level detail you often get with moving magnets

The stately plucking of the strings of the National Symphony Orchestra during the opening of Chabrier's *España* are pleasingly strident, clear and refined. The music flows really well and the cartridge tracks this powerful piece with its large-scale dynamics and deep bass very cleanly too – just as I would have expected with my revered Shure V15 cartridge of yesteryear.

Overall, the MasterTracker is a, er… master tracker both in name and nature. It delivers a very musical sound that is easy on the ears due to the lack of edginess that you can sometimes get when using a moving-magnet cartridge ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★½

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★½

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★

FEATURES ★★★★★

LIKE: Smooth and detailed; excellent tracking ability

DISLIKE: Slightly cool top-end evident with percussion

WE SAY: A great tracking cartridge that delivers music that flows beautifully

OVERALL ★★★★½

prodigy1
prodigy5

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NAGAOKA
JT-80
NAGAOKA

Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

Nagaoka
JT-80BK £550

Our first offering from Japan, this all-black moving-magnet sits at the top of Nagaoka's JT range

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Nagaoka JT-80BK
ORIGIN
High-output, moving-magnet cartridge
TYPE
Japan
WEIGHT
6.7g
FEATURES
- ABS resin body
- Stylus tip: 0.4x0.7mil
- Tracking force: 1.3g-1.8g

DISTRIBUTOR
Sound Design

Nagaoka started out as a manufacturer of watch parts and cartridge styli over 80 years ago. With the growing demand for replacement needles for phono cartridges, the company began research into sapphire needles and quickly developed its own polishing technology, resulting in Japan's first diamond replacement needle.

Its MP (Moving Permalloy) range of moving-magnet cartridges has been around for many years, with the MP-300 topping the bill. This has now been redesigned from scratch, resulting in the Nagaoka Jeweltone series. The JT-80BK is the flagship model of the range.

The Jeweltone series consists of moving-magnet cartridges, which represents a departure from the moving-iron or moving-permalloy principle previously dominating the MP range. Traditionally, the company has focused on the advantages stemming from a low moving mass. Having said that, Nagaoka has always also manufactured MM carts and has considerable experience in this area.

NAGAOKA
NAGAOKA
JT-80

The JT-80BK uses a boron cantilever fitted with a naked elliptical cut diamond needle. The cantilever is really slim and petite and therefore has a very low mass – in keeping with the company's aim of minimising the moving mass. However, the downside is that the cantilever won't tolerate any rough treatment – accidental or otherwise! The slanted front panel allows for clear viewing of the stylus tip and makes stylus replacement easy. The MP and MM ranges have the same generator assembly, but with the MM range, Nagaoka has made changes to the structure of the cantilever assembly, the core materials and the hardness of the damper rubber – which it considers have made a significant improvement to the sound balance.

> **Nagaoka has a great reputation for its ability with vocals and I'm not let down**

The JT-80BK is designed for the standard 47Kohm load from an MM phono stage, with a recommended load capacitance of 100pF. With a dynamic compliance of 7.3x10^6cm/dyne, the cartridge is an ideal match for a medium-mass tonearm.

Sound quality

I kick off with *Latin Blue* from the Don Rendell and Ian Carr Quintet's *Shades Of Blue*. All the instruments are individually clear and have an excellent sonic focus. The JT-80BK achieves this without interfering with the sense of harmony between the different sections of the orchestra. It is difficult to imagine that this recording is nearly 60 years old as it comes across with all the clarity and presence of a modern pressing.

Moving on to some baroque music with Trevor Pinnock on the harpsichord playing Bach's *Partita No.1 In B Flat Major*, all of the tonal complexities of this wonderful piece are clearly reproduced. When Pinnock changes the stops part of the way through the third movement (*Corrente*), the tone of the instrument instantly brightens. The elliptical diamond stylus extracts all of the details from this wonderful recording.

For some female vocals, I next listen to Lyn Stanley's *It's Magic*. Nagaoka has a great reputation for its ability to reproduce vocals well and I am certainly not disappointed here. Stanley's rendition comes across as very classy as her relaxed and sophisticated style of singing comes through with marvellous clarity.

For a full orchestra, I play Chabrier's *España* by The National Symphony Orchestra. The beautiful flowing musicality of the orchestra is very evident with the JT-80BK and the energy of this powerful piece, as well as the large dynamic range, is faithfully reproduced.

To summarise, the JT-80BK offers a really natural-sounding presentation across a wide range of different music. In particular, I appreciate the great sense of realism from this top-of-the-range Jeweltone ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY
★★★★½
FEATURES
★★★★★

LIKE: Natural, realistic and full sound quality

DISLIKE: Delicate cantilever assembly

WE SAY: A cartridge that offers a realistic and refined sound

OVERALL
★★★★★

BRING ALL YOUR MUSIC...

G1.1

AURALiC

AURALiC
Avratz
4
68
03:37
10:23
AURALiC

TO LIFE

Engineered to exacting standards, the ALTAIR G1.1 Digital Audio Streamer excels in today's demanding environment of high-resolution music streaming. Designed and consistently updated in-house, our Lightning streaming platform has led the industry since its release in 2014.

Focused on providing the best possible sound, our Lightning DS app connects natively to Qobuz, Tidal, Amazon Music, HighResAudio and KKBOX. Our G1.1 products are Roon Ready and OpenHome compatible, allowing you to access and control your music however you choose.

FOR MORE INFORMATION PLEASE CONTACT YOUR LOCAL SPECIALIST RETAILER OR VISIT AURALIC.COM

AURALIC PRESS AWARDS

Sumiko **Amethyst** £630

Our second Japanese offering is named after the violet variety of quartz and is also an all-black moving magnet

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Sumiko Amethyst

ORIGIN
High-output, moving-magnet cartridge

TYPE
Japan

WEIGHT
6.5g

FEATURES
- Low resonance body and enhanced generator system
- Stylus tip: nude line-contact
- Tracking force: 1.8g-2.2g

DISTRIBUTOR
Henley Audio Ltd.

Sumiko produced its first cartridge in 1982 and all of its offerings are hand-built in Japan. The company's focus has always been to create needles that combine state-of-the-art technical performance with the practical requirements of superb tracking and a musical and non-fatiguing, sonic presentation. The company is particularly known for its budget-friendly Oyster cartridge, but its range of moving magnets, which are rather confusingly all part of the series, extends right up to the premium Amethyst before us.

Being the flagship of the Oyster series, the Amethyst is considered by Sumiko to be its most ambitious moving-magnet offering to date. This cartridge features a nude line-contact stylus coupled to a 0.5mm diameter aluminium cantilever, which is intended to extract every minute detail from the groove. Due to the level of fidelity on offer, the Amethyst also employs a mechanically enhanced body, which does not feature in the other models of the Oyster series, such as the more affordable Rainier, Olympia and Moonstone. With its unique body, the Amethyst's upgraded generator assembly has been designed to provide excellent tracking ability coupled with huge dynamics and very low noise reproduction. Sumiko has achieved this in a moving-magnet cartridge that still allows the user to replace the stylus assembly when it has worn out. The company considers that the Amethyst even surpasses some moving-coil options as far as resolution and detail are concerned. Although it looks similar to the other offerings in the series, its body is unique and it is therefore only suitable for use with the RS Amethyst replacement stylus.

Sound quality

All of the instruments in *Blue Mosque* played by the Don Rendell and Ian Carr Quintet are reproduced very clearly with the Amethyst in situ. Each player occupies their own physical space in the soundstage – both in width and depth. The music comes across as soft, in a smooth sort of way. The cartridge seems really at home with the easy-going jazz style and I feel I can relax and listen to it for hours without tiring of the music. The playing of the JS Bach *Partitas* reveals a pure and effortless sound, without any hint of muddiness in the harmonics of the harpsichord's individual notes during the louder passages. However, I feel that the lack of muddiness may be partly due to less high-end detail available when compared with some of the other offerings in the group, but the Sumiko does at least present a pleasingly warm balance to the music.

Lyn Stanley's jazz vocals have a great realism with the Amethyst, and all of the individual instruments of her Jazz Mavericks, as well as the orchestral backing, have a well-defined position in my room. As with the JS Bach harpsichord recording, the music has a warm tonal balance, which really seems to suit Stanley's sultry jazz singing style.

> **It produces a pure and effortless sound, without any hint of muddiness**

With the Amethyst tracking the pressing of *Capriccio Espagnol*, the finale is delivered with plenty of power and energy, which is a testament to its obviously great tracking ability. The muscular bass of the drums comes across beautifully with a tight and punchy delivery.

The warm presentation of this nicely made cartridge is certainly very appealing, especially for those users who prefer an analogue smoothness from their system. However, it is not a particularly insightful option and will not find friends who like the detail and immediacy of digital music, for example. What it does deliver, however, is a powerful and beefy bass characteristic which, combined with its great tracking ability, will make it appeal to many ●

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★½

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

FEATURES
★★★★★

LIKE: Smooth and warm sound; great tracking ability

DISLIKE: Some might wish for a slightly brighter presentation

WE SAY: A relaxed-sounding cartridge that can be listened to for hours on end

OVERALL
★★★★★

ATLAS · EOS 4.0em
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DESIGNED & HANDMADE IN SCOTLAND

Hi-Fi Choice GROUPTEST WINNER

Vertere Sabre £900

Introducing the premium moving-magnet cartridge offered by Touraj Moghaddam's company

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Vertere Sabre

ORIGIN
High-output, moving-magnet cartridge

TYPE
UK

WEIGHT
10.3g

FEATURES
- Aluminium body
- Stylus tip: elliptical diamond
- Tracking force: 1.9g-2.1g

DISTRIBUTOR
Vertere Ltd.

UK's Vertere manufactures three phono cartridges – its top-of-the-range Mystic moving coil (*HFC* 499), the entry-level Magneto moving magnet and the premium moving-magnet Sabre before you here. According to the company's CEO and Founder, Touraj Moghaddam, the aim of the company's products is to bring the performance of audio systems at home as close as possible to the original master in order to reproduce what the musicians, mastering and cutting engineers intend for us to hear. The Sabre has been designed with this aim firmly in mind. Moghaddam has been designing turntables since 1984, but it wasn't until the birth of Vertere that he started creating his reference tonearms to assist him. He says that this approach helped him to identify the weakest links in a system and therefore determine how the company should develop its products moving into the future.

The Sabre's body is precision-machined from solid aluminium alloy with its final mass tuned to the generator. This design, according to Vertere, is intended to control unwanted mechanical vibrations and provide the best physical support for the generator mechanism. The cartridge employs an Alnico magnet, which has a strong magnetism-to-size ratio and offers a stable and long-term magnetic field.

The soundstage has superb depth and width, and appears startlingly real

The generator is fixed to the body with four spike screws that have been carefully positioned and tightened for best rigidity and performance. The top of the body has three contact areas to provide the best physical coupling of the Sabre to the headshell. Also, there is a ridge machined on its top front to assist with precise alignment.

The cantilever and suspension are individually positioned and aligned at Vertere, with the aim of maximising musical performance. However, this means the stylus assembly is not user-replaceable. The elliptical diamond stylus tip is bonded to an aluminium tube cantilever and has been designed to give good tracking ability and a low surface noise without compromising on high frequency response. Below 15Hz to over 25kHz is quoted, which the company credits to the cartridge having a low mass moving magnet and a healthy output of 4.0mV.

Sound quality

Starting off with the Don Rendell and Ian Carr Quintet's *Blue Mosque*, the music comes across with fantastic clarity. The brass instruments have a great presence with no sense of harshness. In particular, the sax on the left has an amazing authenticity. The performance is startlingly real and the three-dimensional soundstage has superb depth and width. In fact, my loudspeakers seem to disappear altogether as the source of the music and the soundstage extends beyond the constraints of the two cabinets.

With JS Bach's *Partita No.1*, the performance comes over as extremely refined. As with *Blue Mosque*, the presence of the instrument is scarily real and, if I close my eyes, I can easily believe that Pinnock is playing in front of me. The harpsichord has lashings of detail and clarity.

The Sabre seems equally at home with Lyn Stanley's vocals on *The Way You Look Tonight*. Of particular note is the bass on this 45rpm LP, which is really tight and punchy.

Listening to *Capriccio Espagnol*, the exciting opening movement is powerful, spacious and open. In fact, it is everything I have come to expect from this audiophile recording from Chasing The Dragon. Like the Bach *Partita*, the full orchestra comes across as very refined, and the playing by the NSO seems effortless from start to finish.

There is little to complain about with Vertere's Sabre. It seems to encapsulate many of the top qualities I associate with moving-coil carts ●

▶

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

FEATURES
★★★★★

LIKE: Refined and authoritative sound quality at home across a wide range of music

DISLIKE: Nothing

WE SAY: A wonderful MM cartridge that seems to deliver across the full spectrum of requirements

OVERALL
★★★★★

MUSICAL FIDELITY

M3 SI & SCD

PROMOTION

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Integrated Amplifier

SAVE £250

SAVE £250

M3sCD

CD player and digital hub

M3 PROMO

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Group test verdict

Having had a wonderful time taking all six cartridges for a spin, a conflicted ***Neville Roberts*** sums up his experience as he struggles to find a winner

TRYING TO ARRIVE at a winner was always going to be difficult. Each cartridge has its own special character and personal preference is inevitably going to be a factor in assessments, as with most things hi-fi, but here is my run-down on these six delights.

The Nagaoka treats me to a really natural-sounding presentation across all of the musical choices. It offers a great sense of realism and is a joy to audition. Although it's the lowest-priced cartridge in the group and the cantilever is a bit delicate, it more than holds its own musically among strong competition.

The Sumiko is very easy on the ear and relaxing to listen to. It takes the dynamics of a large orchestra in its stride and demonstrates a wonderful tracking ability. Bass response is beefy, powerful and punchy, but some may prefer a slightly brighter presentation overall.

As its name suggests, the MoFi MasterTracker is another great tracking cart. It gives a smooth presentation without the edginess often associated with MM designs. Also, the music is delightfully detailed and clear, although the extreme top end feels a little rolled-off at times.

Living up to its name in equal measure, the Goldring delivers a heroic performance with great clarity, detail and timing. It presents a neutral tonal balance across all types of music. On the down side, stereo imaging is a tad 'left and right' in comparison with the others.

With its rustic wooden body, the Grado offers a bright performance across the full musical spectrum, coupled with a well-controlled and punchy bass response. On the downside, it's difficult to see the stylus tip for cuing without bending down to look sideways at it.

WINNER

The Vertere Sabre has me captivated right from the first piece that I spin. It presents a totally believable sound, whether playing a solo instrument or a full orchestra. Bass is tight and punchy, and the midrange and top-end clear, refined and totally captivating.

Make/model	**Goldring** Eroica HX	**Grado** Timbre Sonata3	**MoFi Electronics** MasterTracker	**Nagaoka** JT-80BK	**Sumiko** Amethyst	**Vertere** Sabre
Price	£600	£630	£800	£500	£630	£900
Sound	★★★★½	★★★★½	★★★★½	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★	★★★★½	★★★★½	★★★★★	★★★★½	★★★★★
Build	★★★★½	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★½	★★★★★	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★	★★★★½	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★	★★★★½	★★★★½	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
	An easy way to experience some of the delights of an MC cartridge	**Once set up correctly, you can expect to enjoy a bright top end and punchy bass**	**A great tracking cartridge that delivers music that flows beautifully**	**A cartridge that offers a joyfully realistic and refined sound**	**A relaxed-sounding cartridge that can be listened to for hours on end**	**A wonderful cart that delivers across the full spectrum of musical requirements**
Website	**goldring.co.uk**	**gradolabs.com**	**mofielectronics.com**	**nagaoka.co.jp**	**sumikophonocartridges.com**	**vertereacoustics.com**

Key features

Type	Moving coil	Moving iron	Moving magnet	Moving magnet	Moving magnet	Moving magnet
Removable stylus	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Cantilever	Aluminium	Aluminium	Tapered design	Boron	Aluminium	Aluminium
Tracking force	1.5g-2g	1.6g-1.9g	1.8g-2.2g	1.3g-1.8g	1.8g-2.2g	1.9g-2.1g
Compliance	25mm/N	20μm/mN	10x10^{6}cm/dyne	7.3x10^{6}cm/dyne	12x10^{6}cm/dyne	10x10^{6}cm/dyne

TRY WITH THESE

CARTRIDGE CLEANER:
Lyra SPT Stylus Performance Treatment £45

By using the accompanying brush with its super-soft bristles, a very small amount of the cleaning fluid can be applied to the stylus tip only – not the cantilever assembly – as the fluid should not come into contact with any other part of the cartridge.

TRACKING FORCE GAUGE:
Pro-Ject Measure it E £30

The Measure it E is a highly accurate electronic balance that is designed for measuring stylus tracking forces up to 5g in 0.002g increments. Make sure the stylus support platform is located away from the sensitive electronics, thus reducing the risk of the magnets in the cart affecting the readings.

ANTI-STATIC GUN:
Milty Zerostat 3
£50 *HFC* 411

Static charge is the sworn enemy of good sound reproduction and can be induced simply by sliding a record in or out of a sleeve. Charges can also build up during playing, and when they discharge, they result in an audible click.

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SERIES
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POWER
AUX 1/PH
TUNER
CD
AUX 2
AV
TAPE
VOLUME

Our Latest Work Of Art

The NEW **3510** Series

Our new 3510 Series Integrated Amplifier is a masterclass in musicality and power. With 110w RMS, six line inputs and the option to fit a MC or MM phono module or even a plug in DAC, it redefines what is possible in one box amplification. To find out more about our exciting new 3510 Series which also includes a pre-amp as well as power amplifiers, visit **exposurehifi.com** today.

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HEGEL
1
2
3
4
5
HT
Volume
HEGEL

Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

Power and the glory!

Dubbed The Conductor and The Orchestra, Hegel's upgraded pre/power amplifiers are superb flagships worthy of their names

By all accounts, Hegel, a company that doesn't exactly have a reputation for banging out new products on a regular basis, has been very busy over in Norway during the last few years quietly working to make its major integrated amplifiers Roon Ready. It now appears the company has also been beavering away to create a follow-up to its flagship separates, the P30 preamp and H30 power amp. Both of these were originally launched back in 2010, therefore predating new advances made at the company, one being its SoundEngine2 'error cancelling' technology.

Now, after being teased over a year ago at the High End Munich Show, the P30A and H30A have arrived, bringing the Norwegian company's reference models up to speed. Of course, Hegel wouldn't be Hegel without adding to the creativity – not to mention out-and-out fun – by giving the duo suitable nicknames, in this case plumping for Conductor for the preamp and Orchestra for the nigh-on 50kg power amp. There's no denying these sound a lot more thought-provoking and appetising than the simple 'A' added to the P30 and H30 prototype titles, so hip-hoorah for that.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Hegel P30A/H30A

ORIGIN
Norway

TYPE
Pre/power amplifiers

WEIGHT
7.2kg/47.4kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
430 x 96 x 300mm
430 x 240 x 575mm

FEATURES
- P30A inputs: 2x XLR balanced; 3x RCA unbalanced; Home Theatre inputs
- P30A outputs: 1x XLR balanced; 2x RCA unbalanced
- H30A rated at: 2x 300W (8ohm)
- H30A inputs: RCA unbalanced; XLR balanced

DISTRIBUTOR
Hegel Music Systems

WEBSITE
hegel.com

Priced at a not inconsiderable £17,000 for the H30A and further £7,000 for the P30A, this pairing is aiming high, competing with pre/power combinations including the likes of Mark Levinson's N°536/N°5206 and McIntosh's MC1502 and C70 – and these are just two examples of some extremely classy and varied competition.

Smartly, in the case of the amp, Hegel has opted to do what it does best: build as much power as it can into a rather austere-looking box, and let the product speak for itself.

The components are dressed rather differently than what's come before, heralding a design change which other brands would call minor, but in the case of the minimalists from Oslo might be considered earth-shattering. Retained from the older models is the full black chassis and next-to-nothing controls, but the angular wedge cut out of the top rim adds a twist of sophistication previously missing. As you would expect from a power amp, however, there's little more to say about the H30A's looks: it's a big box with a power button, and choice of unbalanced RCA or balanced XLR inputs on the rear.

The P30A is a touch more outgoing, though, sporting a brace of dials for volume and input selection, the latter a bit of a looker with its crescent of legends and white LEDs per input. There are five of these: three single-ended RCA pairs and two sets of balanced XLR pairs, plus an additional sixth Home Theatre 'max volume' input for integration into a surround-sound system should that be your bag.

There are no digital inputs, as the P30A is purely analogue. It's also fully balanced, duplicating every part from start to finish, including separate volume controls per channel. This strict separation of left and right is continued in the H30A, with two large 1kVA toroidal transformers, one per channel, together with an equally imposing dual arrangement of 56 large reservoir capacitors. This helps explain why when it comes to shifting it (something you won't want to do too often), it's a hefty, two-person job. Hegel's SoundEngine2, a feed-forward compensation regime, which the company's main man Bent Holter has refined to reduce distortion in as least an invasive fashion as possible, is also implemented on each channel.

The combo handles large orchestras and more refined works with equal panache

Hegel markets the H30A as a monoblock first, stereo power amp second. The company – and we can imagine its accountants are in agreement – envisages the P30A being paired with two of these monstrous units. You won't be lacking power in that case, as in mono mode the H30A is specified to deliver 1.1kW into 8ohm. Opt for one H30A and you'll still enjoy appreciable grunt. Bank manager agreeing, that is...

Before this audition, we've been fortunate enough to encounter the system a few times paired up with KEF Blade One Meta floorstanders, as there's a working relationship between Hegel and GP Acoustics in many countries. It's a match that seems to work extremely well, although during testing here we decide to go with Focal's three-way floorstanding Sopra N°2, which in our day-to-day setup is connected to a Hegel Reference H590 (*HFC* 449). We decide to leave this – the company's top-flight integrated amp – in place, allowing for comparisons between the two to be made.

HOW IT COMPARES

Rated at a relatively conservative 2x 300W/8ohm, the H30A is Hegel's most capable power amp to date with a massive 2.45kW available to support transient peaks into the lowest 1ohm loads. This puts the H30A in the elevated company of far costlier power amps, including D'Agostino's £35k Progression S350 and PS Audio's £30k BHK Mono 600, a robust tube/ MOSFET hybrid monoblock. Direct competition comes in the form of Rotel's Michi series P5 preamp (*HFC* 467, £3,000 including a DAC stage) and M8 monoblocks (£12,400). These black power amps combine fuss-free style and operation with an impact as deft as it can be devastating, all allied to a natural musical flow...

Sound quality

Although there's a fairly significant price jump between the H590 and the P30A/H30A – and they clearly seem to be aimed at very different audiences – there's an obvious performance strand running through them. Call it a 'music-first' approach. In that sense, Hegel's new duo offers more of the same – well, very much more of the same – with no sign of a gaping performance chasm between the two.

Yet, as hoped, the P30A and H30A are able to showcase more control and refinement. The choice of DAC stage will impact the tonal character too, compared with the AKM-based converter in the H590, and with more challenging loudspeakers, the combo obviously charges ahead.

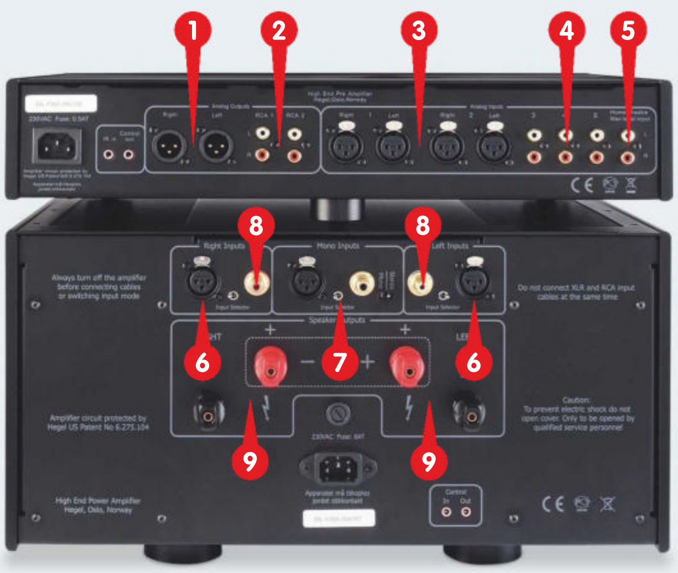
Kicking off with Andrew Gourlay's *Wagner: Parcifal Suite* the system impresses with a very natural, lifelike portrayal overflowing with detail. This collection of music from the German composer's magnum opus is thrilling stuff, especially if you don't have a spare four and a half hours to set aside to listen to the full opera.

Streaming from Roon through an Auralic Aries LE and Musical Fidelity M6x DAC, the P30A/H30A embraces the wealth of information in these recordings. *Act 3. Transformation Music* is an eye opener, with the momentous funereal progression building to a climax, church bells ringing and horns at full blast, then fading softly away. There's so much going on, both in terms of composition and dynamics, and it is all displayed brilliantly on a very grand scale.

This part is an exciting high point, as the rest of the suite is more subdued and romantic, favouring smaller details over melodrama. However, Gourlay isn't the first to let the music from Wagner speak on its own. *The Ring: An Orchestra*, with Neeme Järvi conducting, is an earlier, more rousing attempt. Playing *V. Die Walkuren*, at high volume, which these days evokes images of ominous, balletic pea-coloured helicopters instead of the intended original warrioresses – cheers for that, Mr *Apocalypse Now* Coppola – doesn't strain the Hegel system one bit. The instrumentation sounds crystal clear, from the attack of the horns to the sustained crash of the cymbals. It all feels very effortless, as if there are no limits.

Looking past the Sopra N°2's own sound signature, the P30A/H30A makes a striking show of rendering these recordings as they are, with only a fleeting touch of added colour. This is what the H30A, in particular, excels at: not over embellishing, but

CONNECTIONS



① **P30A: Balanced XLR outputs**

② **P30A: 2x RCA outs**

③ **P30A: 2x Balanced XLR inputs**

④ **P30A: 3x single-ended RCA inputs**

⑤ **P30A: Home Theatre 'direct' inputs**

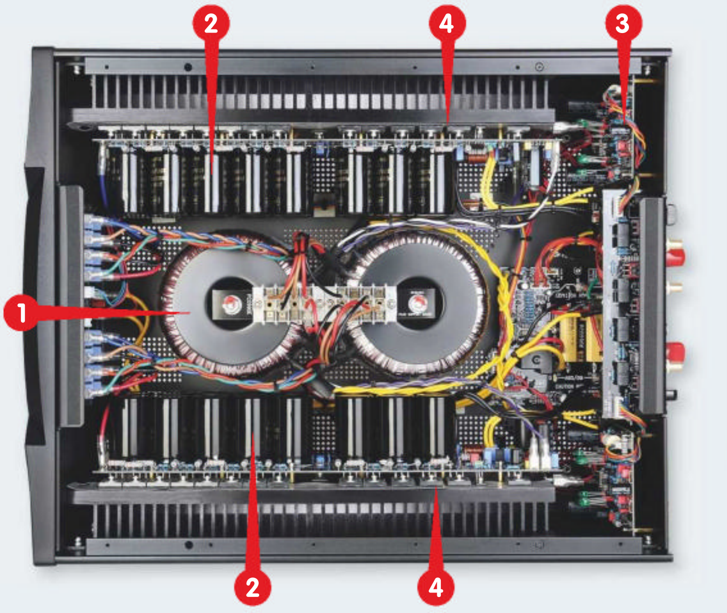
⑥ **H30A: Switchable XLR inputs**

⑦ **H30A: Bridged mono inputs**

⑧ **H30A: Switchable RCA inputs**

⑨ **H30A: 4mm speaker binding posts**

INSIGHT



① Dual mono PSU transformers...

② ...are joined by 16x8200uF/100V reservoir capacitors per side

③ Balanced line input/voltage amplification stage

④ The H30A includes no fewer than 14 pairs of Sanken power transistors on each heatsink

HEGEL HISTORY

In 1988 Bent Holter, a student at the Technical University in Trondheim (NTNU), wrote a thesis about the original design of the transistor used in amplifiers, and how you could cure the problems of traditional hi-fi systems – such as distortion. This developed into a project that became the basis of what is known today as SoundEngine Technology.

Holter went on to form a company in order to act on his findings, naming it after a rock-metal group he played in called The Hegel Band. When they needed amplifiers for concerts, he suggested building them himself, financially backed by Norwegian multinational Telenor – one of the biggest players in the telecommunications industry.

The brand took off in the early Nineties, developing a DAC in 1994, its first CD player in 1996 and steadily continued to research, develop and launch new products. Which brings us up to date with the highly anticipated release of the P30A preamp and H30A power amp from a company which also boasts a reputation for producing some of the most modern and sophisticated D/A converters on the market.

The company website states: "SoundEngine Technology was just a start. Today there are six more original technical solutions in Hegel's portfolio. The company has dealers in 63 countries and its products are sold all over the world. Awards and press reviews speak for themselves."

letting excitement come from the music at hand. This might strike some listeners, used to amps that tend to embroider, as a bit dull at first but to our mind there's so much more long-term joy in listening to the actual music than to apparatus.

Folkesange, the last album from Danish performer Myrkur (née Amalie Bruun), combines traditional Scandinavian folk and instruments, such as the nyckelharpa, with more modern sounds. No challenge there for the P30A/H30A, with Bruun's singing on *Ella* airily arranged on top of powerfully driven percussion. The preamp, helped by the capable Musical Fidelity DAC, shows off its chops on the *Leaves Of Yggdrasil*, dextrously weaving the background choral singing with the main vocals, and the sparse piano notes with the strings.

Myrkur's older *M* set has a different flavour, veering closer to black metal, and it presents the P30A/H30A with a different challenge of reproducing guitar and double bass drum-driven soundscapes upon which more delicate instruments float. This hard contrast between sheer power and subtlety is difficult to pull off, but again the P30A and H30A simply shrug and take care of business.

The power chords on *Hæven*, the dramatic piano playing beneath the singing on *Byssan Lull* – both are very different in character – but this Hegel combo has the capability to handle large orchestrations and more refined works with equal panache.

At £17,000 for the H30A and £7,000 for the P30A, this pair is aiming high

Some 20 years ago, 'mathrock' outfit Cursive released their landmark *Domestica* album, an extremely raw listening experience detailing the painfully gradual breakup of singer Tim Kasher's marriage, with ultra-precise guitar riffs and drumming to turn up the intensity. Spinning the 2022 vinyl re-release, on a balanced Pro-Ject X2 B and Phono Box S3 B (*HFC* 495), the Hegel amplifiers are able to deliver the drums into the room with superb timing and incredible dynamic impact.

Conclusion

Mathrock bands rarely sound as tight and in control on stage, atmosphere and energy replacing audio subtlety and losing some of the instrumental intricacy in the live setting. All of which makes an excellent recording like this played via the admirable P30A/H30A setup arguably the best and most fulfilling way to enjoy it ●

Designwise, it's basically a big, black block...

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★☆

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

FEATURES
★★★★★

LIKE: Power and precision

DISLIKE: The design looks a bit austere; it's far from cheap

WE SAY: It's hard to imagine any speaker that this system can't drive to excellence

OVERALL
★★★★★

FURUTECH
PURE TRANSMISSION
NCF

> "...once you've heard it then heard it taken away, you won't want to deny yourself if you can at all avoid it.."
> "...you won't be able to remain a tweak cynic when you hear this!"
> *Srajan Ebaen 6moons.com*

NCF
Clear Line-EU

NCF
Clear Line-UK

PF Brutus Award, 2020

Introducing the Furutech NCF Clear Line

Plug into any vacant power outlet on the same circuit as your system and immediately experience improvements in the depth and focus of the sound stage, harmonics, and tonal balance. The NCF Clear Line is unique a passive damping device incorporating Furutech's NCF material that will eliminate mechanical and electrical resonance from your power supply.

PF Brutus Award, 2017
Enjoy the Music.com Best of 2019 Award
2018 HIGHLY RECOMMENDED
AWARD 2018 Grand Prix
VGP 2018 GOLD AWARD WINNER
Paul Rigby GOLDEN GROOVY 10/10
2018 MJ Technology Of The Year

NCF Booster

NCF Booster-Signal

NCF Booster-Signal-L

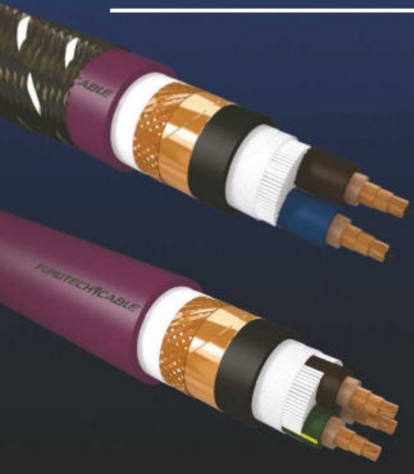
FI-50M NCF
FI-50 NCF
FI-E50 NCF

FI-UK1363 NCF

Furutech NCF Series

Incorporated into selected Furutech products, NCF features a special crystalline material that has two 'active' properties. First, it generates negative ions that eliminate static. Second, it converts thermal energy into far infrared. Furutech combines this remarkable material with nano-sized ceramic particles and carbon powder for their additional 'piezoelectric effect' damping properties. The resulting Nano Crystal² Formula is the ultimate electrical and mechanical damping material. Created by Furutech, it is found exclusively in Furutech products.

AWARD 2017
AWARD 2016 Special Prix



DSS-4.1

DPS-4.1

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CAMBRIDGE AUDIO
MXN10
1
2
3
4

Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

Pound stretcher

Cambridge Audio's latest streamer is a comprehensively specified budget effort and **Ed Selley** thinks it's rather good

The affordable streamer category has never quite scaled the heights of popularity that many (myself included) thought it might. The development of amplifiers and systems that have streaming on board and the ability of a number of generic devices to be perfectly capable streamers in their own right have eaten into the demand for such things. Nevertheless, the demand is there and Cambridge Audio has been providing options for longer than most. The MXN10 (and its full-width equivalent AXN10) is its latest offering.

For an affordable component, the MXN10 manages to do a lot. The decoding hardware is an ESS Sabre ES9033Q DAC made available to a pair of RCA analogue outputs. This is joined by coaxial and optical outs that can run at the same time. Some quick tests into the digital inputs of a Cambridge Audio Edge A suggest that these connections are entirely transparent. It offers sample rate handling up to 32-bit768kHz and DSD512. Though MQA was introduced on the DacMagic 200M (*HFC* 484), it's unfortunately no longer included here.

As well as the ability to stream content from network-attached drives and USB storage connected directly, the MXN10 also has support for Qobuz, Tidal, Deezer and Spotify along with internet radio. There is also AirPlay2, Chromecast and Bluetooth support.

The MXN10 is built around a fourth generation of the Cambridge Audio Stream Magic streaming platform. This makes use of an ARM Cortex A53 chip and has iOS and Android apps, both of which are entirely stable in use. The general layout of the different functions is clean and logical and one thing I like very much is the absence of a 'play queue'. The grid view for album browsing also helps with large libraries and the internet radio search functions are very good.

Like many affordable streamers, the MXN10 ditches any form of screen; the only status indicators are a power and network light. There's always an element of risk with this approach; if you are having issues, the MXN10 is not going to tell you very much about them, but given that the review sample is stable during testing, it seems to pay off here. As well as the power button and status lights, the MXN10 has four assignable buttons that can be used to select a playlist or internet radio station. If you've no need for these, though, it is easy to keep it hidden out of sight.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Cambridge Audio MXN10

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Network player

WEIGHT
1.2kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
215 x 52 x 191mm

FEATURES
- Supports sample rates up to: 32-bit/768kHz; DSD512
- AirPlay 2; Chromecast; Bluetooth 5.0
- Roon Ready

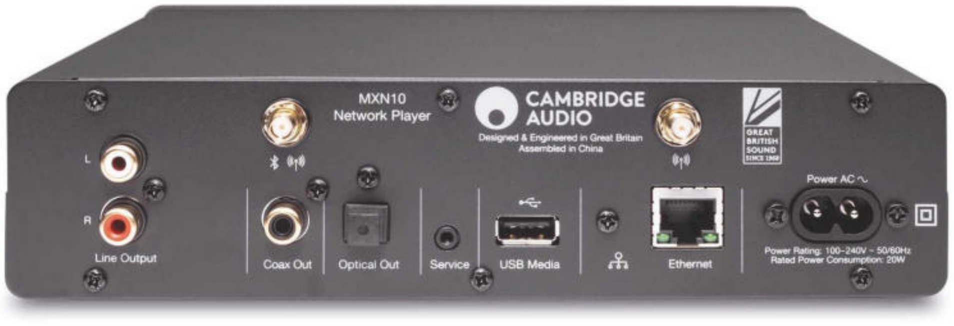
DISTRIBUTOR
Cambridge Audio

WEBSITE
cambridgeaudio.com

Sound quality

All of this comes packed into a chassis that could be the standard for the word 'unobtrusive.' The half-width casework is finished in the now typical Cambridge Audio silvery grey and feels very solid and carefully assembled. One touch I particularly like is the fitment of a figure-eight socket on the back, which avoids the need for a wall-wart type power supply. I find the wireless performance to be very good.

After completing the painless setup procedure, perhaps the most notable aspect of the MXN10's performance is how closely it follows the Cambridge


MXN10
Network Player
CAMBRIDGE AUDIO
Designed & Engineered in Great Britain
Assembled in China
GREAT BRITISH SOUND SINCE 1968
L
R
Line Output
Coax Out
Optical Out
Service
USB Media
Ethernet
Power AC
Power Rating: 100-240V ~ 50/60Hz
Rated Power Consumption: 20W

Audio 'house sound' despite that sound having its origins in a Wolfson DAC rather than an ESS one. It manifests itself in a tonal balance that manages to sound full and refined, even bordering on warmth at times without tipping over into being soft or bloomy. The jagged *Alien Coast* by St Paul And The Broken Bones retains its starkness and impact but where some digital front-ends have you reaching to lower the volume a little, here there's enough refinement to keep you listening loud.

Dig a little deeper into this balance and the MXN10 becomes more impressive still. The tonal realism with both voices and instruments is consistently good. Martha Tilston's wonderfully distinctive vocals leap out of Zero 7's *Pop Art Blue* in a way that grabs the attention and ensures you forget the mechanics of how the signal makes it to your ear and concentrate on the sound itself. On more than a few occasions with ESS-based devices, I have found this suspension of disbelief to be tricky; the sound is impressive but some of the 'cleverness' that went into it stays audible. Here it's successfully subsumed to the wider performance.

The performance is easily the equal of any sub-£1,000 network player rival

The MXN10 is not the most ballistic-sounding device you can buy for this sort of money, but it manages to strike a balance between being lively enough when there is a requirement for it without making less frenetic material sound like it's being forced. It's the sort of balance that will suit a diverse collection and while there may be rivals that are livelier, some of this all-round ability might suffer. The bass response that underpins the MXN10 isn't seismic; it's one of the last areas where premium product can still eke out an advantage over more affordable options, but it's still deep enough to remain convincing.

HOW IT COMPARES

The Cambridge undercuts the Bluesound Node (*HFC* 482) by £50. The differences in the spec reflect the different priorities the two companies have. The Bluesound has more streaming service support and BluOS is superior for multi-room use. The HDMI ARC is also very helpful. The MXN10 is the superior standalone device, though. The better sample rate support ties into a performance that is fractionally more involving. If you want one streamer for your system rather than a house full of them, Cambridge Audio has the edge.

One final attribute is rather unusual in a relatively affordable piece of kit. There is enough resolution here to ensure that the MXN10 will reflect the benefits of high-resolution audio and decent mastering when they are available to take advantage of. The sympathetic remaster of Talk Talk's *The Colour Of Spring* available as a 24-bit/96kHz download reveals its slightly softer and less glassy presentation over a 16-bit/44.1kHz rip of the original CD and where there is the extra quality available, it does an impressively good job of making that extra information available.

The really clever part of this is that all of this is achieved without the sacrifice of making poor recordings and compressed material sound thin or hard edged in any way. Spotify is still a more than listenable experience on the MXN10 and the combination of the excellent in-app browsing for internet radio and those four preset buttons on the front panel make this an exceptionally talented internet radio and extremely well adapted for use in this role.

Conclusion

Even if you want a rather wider spread of abilities than simply a means of making Radio 4 happen without recourse to an app, the MXN10 manages to get an awful lot right. Cambridge Audio has pared away functionality that you don't need, trusting in the basic soundness of its app, to create a streamer that offers a very comprehensive specification and pleasing user experience alongside a level of sound quality that is the easily equal of anything I can recall testing under £1,000 and an absolute must-audition for anyone shopping for a streamer at this price point ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★½

FEATURES
★★★★½

LIKE: Consistently excellent sound; great spec; good stability

DISLIKE: No USB out; no native Amazon or Apple Music support

WE SAY: A wonderfully equipped and strong performing streamer at a great price

OVERALL
★★★★★

Hi-Fi Choice
RECOMMENDED

A bird in the hand...

This affordable wired headphone aimed primarily at classical music buffs is one to tweet about reckons ***Cliff Joseph***

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Sivga Oriole

ORIGIN
China

TYPE
Closed-back, over-ear headphone

WEIGHT
280g

FEATURES
- 50mm drivers
- Frequency response: 20Hz-20kHz
- 2.5mm-to-3.5mm 2m braided cable

DISTRIBUTOR
Amazon

WEBSITE
sivgaaudio.com

Most of Sivga's headphones are more expensive, open-backed models with a chunky – and often rather ornate – build suited to indoor use. In contrast, the Oriole is compact and lightweight and its closed-back design and padded earpieces prevent too much sound from escaping, making it ideal for use out and about.

Available in either black or brown, it is sturdily built and includes wooden earpieces with memory foam padding that house 50mm drivers with quoted 20Hz-20kHz frequency response. There's an adjustable, padded headband with freely rotating hinges and it's light and comfortable enough to wear for long periods.

The Oriole is a wired headphone, with no Bluetooth or noise-cancelling features, and the low cost means that it's a little light on accessories too. There's a carrying pouch included along with a twin-headed 2.5mm-to-3.5mm cable and 6.3mm adaptor. A balanced 4.4mm cable is also available as an optional extra for £62.

The Oriole also has a baby brother, called Robin, which is almost identical, but priced at an even more affordable £150. Sivga states that the Oriole is designed to provide a balanced sound, with a wide soundstage that is most suitable for classical music and jazz, while the Robin has extra bass for rock and pop.

Sound quality

The Oriole's focus on classical music means I start with a hi-res stream of Górecki's *Symphony No.3 (Symphony Of Sorrowful Songs)* from Apple Music performed by the Polish National Radio Symphony Orchestra and Beth Gibbons (of Portishead fame). Despite stating that the Oriole offers only 'moderate bass' for classical sounds, it copes admirably with the deep, mournful double bass that opens the piece. The rich texture of the strings captures the bone-deep weariness that pervades the performance and, as additional instruments enter, the Oriole finds space that allows the contrasting melodies to slowly weave around each other. There's a piercing clarity to the violins, creating a sense of urgency that drives the music forward, until the dramatic pause that allows Gibbons' solo vocal to enter. This is a brief vocal interlude, but the Oriole captures the tremulous emotion in Gibbons' voice, soaring above the orchestra and forming the emotional bedrock of the symphony.

Adding a little electronica to the mix, *The Waves* from Max Richter's *Three Worlds* album, further displays the open soundstage of the Oriole, capturing the dramatic swirl of the ocean as it pans all around me. The strings and electronic chimes that slowly appear above the sound of the waves are so delicate that they almost merge into a single sound, and once again the Sivga lends a haunting melancholy to the solo soprano voice as it enters (Grace Davidson this time around). But the real drama here comes from the slow crescendo of the orchestra – powerful, yet restrained as it slowly surges up from the depths and exploits the spacious sound of the Oriole to vast and dramatic effect.

Conclusion

That's almost an hour of tragedy and loss, so I decide to take the Oriole a little outside its classical comfort zone and treat myself to something more uplifting. The closed-back headphone seems to be at its best with voices, capturing Debbie Harry's swagger and attitude on *Maria* by Blondie – "she's like a millionaire, walking on imported air". Meanwhile, Clem Burke's percussion is precise and economical, although the midrange and guitars don't have quite the uplifting energy that the band is capable of, suggesting that the Sivga is indeed more at home with poised and balanced classical sounds. Even so, it's a strong performance from such an affordable headphone, and the Oriole will be a good choice for any classical music fans on a budget ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★½

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★☆

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★☆

FEATURES
★★★☆☆

LIKE: Clear, spacious sound; good for classical music

DISLIKE: Weaker midrange; limited accessories

WE SAY: Few added extras, but a good, affordable headphone that's well suited to classical music

OVERALL
★★★★½

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Volume

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Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

King of convenience

Looking to make your life easier when it comes to your vinyl replay? ***Ed Selley*** thinks Dual might have the answer

In all the excitement around the burgeoning number of turntables available at every price, it's easy to miss that practically all of them require the arm to be lifted on and off the record yourself. For those that don't want to have to leave their chair, Dual has created the automatic CS 429. The basic spec is in keeping with rivals at this sort of price. It is unsuspended and the motor acts on the platter via a belt. Speed selection is electronic and offers a choice of 33, 45 and 78rpm. The arm is a straight aluminium tube with a detachable offset headshell to which an Ortofon 2M Red cart is pre-fitted (ensuring that the change to a superior 2M Blue is a simple stylus change away).

The Dual can handle 7 and 12in records (any 10in vinyl will need you to get hands on) It's usefully quiet and unobtrusive in operation and, thanks to the presence of a thick rubber mat on the platter, doesn't seem to result in unwanted noise at the playing surface. It's harder to ascertain what the effect on the arm is but, when cued manually, the Dual feels smooth and in keeping with similarly priced rivals.

Dual also includes an internal moving-magnet phono stage, which can be switched out of the circuit and output is via RCA connectors rather than captive lead. The power supply is a wall-wart type, but seems to work well enough in practise.

Sound quality

My copy of Daft Punk's *Alive 1997,* which has the longest playing side of any record I own, can be played to the end without the arm lifting and proves fuss-free in use. The presence of all of the hardware required to make the arm work does mean that, compared with Pro-Ject's fearsomely competent Debut Carbon SB (which can be had for £150 less so long as you are content to manually operate it), the Dual lacks some of the bass extension and detail retrieval. What is surprising, however, is just how close the CS 429 gets in other areas.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Dual CS 429

ORIGIN
Germany/China

TYPE
Unsuspended, automatic belt-drive turntable

WEIGHT
6.2kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
367 x 145 x 435mm

FEATURES
- 9in tonearm with detachable headshell
- On board switchable phono stage
- Ortofon 2M cartridge supplied

DISTRIBUTOR
Decent Audio

WEBSITE
hifi.dual.de/en
decentaudio.co.uk

Talk Talk's *Spirit Of Eden* is an entirely satisfying experience. There's enough space in the presentation to let the ephemeral nature of the performances open out into something three dimensional and tangible, and the tonal realism is commendably good (and further improved when I try a 2M Blue stylus). The sparse sounds and simple percussion lines are handled in a way that brings everything together into a cohesive listening experience.

This isn't the most ballistic-sounding turntable you can buy, but there is a commendable level of flow and co-ordination to how it handles the rhythmically complex *Africa Brasil* by Jorge Ben with a welcome blend of composure and engagement. The absence of any out-and-out ballistic edge also means that gentler, less rhythm-driven material sounds fluid and unforced. The limits to the bass extension also don't make themselves felt so seriously that the Dual ever sounds thin or lightweight.

One slight curiosity of the CS 429 is that the performance via the internal phono stage doesn't seem to be easily bettered by more expensive dedicated models. Whether it has been designed with a view to working effectively with the extra mechanical noise that the internal mechanism generates or that it is turned off rather than truly bypassed when switched out of the circuit is unclear, but there are not huge reserves of untapped performance to be extracted from the turntable by using better-quality ancillaries.

Conclusion

In some ways, though, this rather misses the point. The CS 429 offers a reassurance that notionally more talented manual rivals cannot easily match. If automatic functionality is important to you, this is one of the best examples on the market and one that can hold its own against some precocious manual rivals ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★½

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★½

FEATURES
★★★★½

LIKE: Smooth and engaging sound; convenient; well made

DISLIKE: Not as talented as manual rivals; limited development stretch

WE SAY: An automatic turntable that keeps simpler rivals honest, this is an engaging deck

OVERALL
★★★★½

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2

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There is a difference in the quality of sound from the physical format compared to the same music played from a music file. The major difference is one of resolving the details that give the aural clues to the 3-dimensional depth of sound stage, the air and space around instruments and vocalists, and the correct timbre and texture. These are especially important aspects of 2-channel stereo replay and one that make it the more convincing recreation of the concert experience, not just merely a "hi-fi" reproduction.

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La Scala
power
input sel
digital to analog conve
3

4

5

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AC117 V4

Hi-Fi Choice
RECOMMENDED

Blue Riband

The flagship true wireless in-ear from B&W gets a refresh and **Ed Selley** thinks the results are impressive

Considering its reputation when it comes to full-size wireless headphones, Bowers & Wilkins didn't rush into the true wireless in-ear market. And the result was certainly worth the wait. The Pi7 was clever and capable and did well when we reviewed it in *HFC* 478. Nevertheless, a few years later, B&W feels the recipe needs a tweak. Enter the S2 update...

The basics remain the same as before; pairing a 9.2mm dynamic driver with a balanced armature for high frequencies. Where the company has rung the changes is on operational and usage areas. There's now a longer battery life and the Bluetooth range and stability have been improved. This new model has also been designed to use the main B&W app, which allows you to select content and adjust settings.

Aesthetically, barring the rather smart new Blue finish which is my favourite of the three colour options, the new model looks and feels very similar to the older one – but this does reflect that the original got most things right. The Pi7 is comfortable in the ear and has some well-judged dome options to ensure a decent fit. The case is a good size to slot into a pocket and the whole ensemble is well made. It might be a pricey option for true wireless listening, but you can see where the money has gone.

Sound quality

As you might expect, given that the mechanical areas of the Pi7 S2 are unchanged from before, there are not night-and-day differences between it and the original – but this is no bad thing. What the Pi7 S2 does better than almost any other true wireless in-ear is allow you to forget that there is no cabling involved in the performance. The epic *Fear Inoculum* by Tool is given the space and lack of background noise needed to rise effortlessly from silence to become the sprawling, densely layered masterpiece it is. Tonality is consistently believable and bass is controlled, detailed and usefully fast, allowing the performance to move with the level of engagement it needs. Some rivals have more headroom than the Pi7 S2 so I find myself running it near full tilt most of the time, but it is usually sufficient.

The tweaks to wireless stability are worthwhile too. Frustratingly, it is still vulnerable to certain specific types of external interference; shop security barriers being the most commonly encountered, but the stability in very busy spaces is markedly better than before. It also pairs faster and remains stable a greater distance from the connected device. Likewise, battery is an improvement over the older model.

Something that the Pi7 S2 is still spectacularly good at is noise cancelling. The absolute level of volume cut it offers is equalled by a few other premium true wireless models, but the complete lack of effect it has on the overall tonality of the performance is notable and means you can run it most of the time. The dynamic ability to respond to external noise is hugely impressive; with all but the very loudest of external interference, the Bowers & Wilkins is able to handle it before you become aware of the noise. As a final welcome attribute, call quality is excellent too, with sufficiently few clues that the Pi7 S2 is involved in the process that the other caller won't generally know unless you tell them.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Bowers & Wilkins Pi7 S2

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
True wireless, noise-cancelling earphones

WEIGHT
7g each

FEATURES
- 9.2 mm dynamic driver with balanced armature array
- Recharging storage case with wireless charging
- Case can be used as a wireless transmitter

DISTRIBUTOR
Bowers & Wilkins

WEBSITE
bowerswilkins.com

Conclusion

What results is probably not worth upgrading to from the original unless you really like the new blue finish and there is no arguing that the new model sports a thoroughly premium price tag. The level of day-to-day competence on offer here, though, is enormously convincing. The Pi7 S2 delivers extremely high levels of performance and does so while demanding very little of you in return. B&W's flagship true wireless model remains a class act ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★☆

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

FEATURES
★★★★★

LIKE: Superb realism and tonal richness; good wireless stability; interesting features

DISLIKE: Expensive; still some limits to battery life

WE SAY: The pricing is firmly premium, but the Pi7 S2 is an exceptional true wireless earphone

OVERALL
★★★★★

Rothwell
Signature One
transformer coupled mc phono stage

Rothwell

Phonostage & step-up transformer specialists for over 30 years

The first phonostage from Rothwell was unveiled back in 1990. In those days even the concept of an outboard phonostage was unknown to most audiophiles, though of course it's commonplace now. There were very few, if any, on the market then, and the first Rothwell phonostage was well ahead of its time. It was a valve design with a separate and substantial power supply, and it had adjustable load resistance and capacitance – ideas which were adopted only years later by others. 30 years on, Rothwell phonostages are still different from the many me-too offerings. All the designs, from entry-level to the top-of-the-range, are totally discrete transistor circuits without any op-amps at all, and they're all still made in the UK. The Signature One even features onboard step-up transformers, which is pretty rare amongst even the most expensive phonostages in the world.

And step-up transformers for low output moving coil cartridges have been a speciality for over 30 years too. When the world seemed to have turned its back on the transformer, we kept the faith. Now many vinyl afficionados believe that a good step-up transformer is the only way to get the best performance from a LOMC cartridge. If you don't agree, we even make a moving coil headamp (aka a pre-preamp) which can be battery or mains powered. You won't find many of those anywhere else in the world. We even offer step-up transformer for high output moving coil cartridges. You won't find many of those anywhere else either.

www.rothwellaudioproducts.co.uk

Thanks to Doug Brady Hi-fi for their continuing support and for the use of their dem room featured in the picture.

Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

DAC's the way to do it!

FiiO's ambitious new DAC/amp sets its sights on your home entertainment system. ***Cliff Joseph*** gets converted

DETAILS

PRODUCT
FiiO K9 Pro ESS

ORIGIN
China

TYPE
Desktop DAC/amp

WEIGHT
2.8kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
72 x 225 x 200mm

FEATURES
- Inputs: USB-C; USB-B; coaxial; optical; 4.4mm balanced; RCA
- Outputs: 6.35mm; 4.4mm; XLR4; RCA
- Bluetooth 5.0; LDAC; AAC; aptX Adaptive

DISTRIBUTOR
Advanced mp3 Players

WEBSITE
fiio.com
advancedmp3players.co.uk

FiiO is best known for its affordable DACs and DAPs, which very much put their focus on mobile music. However, the K9 Pro ESS is in a different league altogether, providing an impressive desktop DAC/amp with multiple in and output options plus support for hi-res audio formats up to 32-bit/384kHz, DSD256 and MQA.

The back panel has a comprehensive set of connections, including both USB-C and USB-B for computers and mobile devices (a USB-B cable is included), along with coaxial, optical, 4.4mm balanced and RCA inputs. The K9 Pro ESS can even act as a Bluetooth receiver for mobile devices, with support for AAC, aptX Adaptive and LDAC codecs.

Outputs are equally impressive, with RCA and balanced XLR connectors on the back, while the front provides 6.35mm, 4.4mm and balanced XLR4 headphone connectors, with a 6.35-to-3.5mm adaptor included. There are volume, gain and input selection controls on the front panel, but you can also select inputs and adjust 10-band EQ settings with the FiiO Control app. This has some rough edges, though, sometimes telling me that the DAC is 'disconnected' when I am already connected and listening to music via Bluetooth. This prompts some random button tapping until I figure out the correct way to set it up.

Sound quality

FiiO's presentation may be a little untidy, but the K9 Pro ESS' sound quality is a model of clarity and precision. The first thing I notice as I begin *Violence* by Low, with my Sivga Oriole headphone (see p48) connected via the 4.4mm balanced output, is the sheer weight of the DAC's twin THX amps. Even with the volume set at around 40 percent, the power of the K9 takes me slightly aback and I never feel the need to step above 60 percent during any of the listening tests. It's not just noise, though, the FiiO is perceptive enough to let the lightly strummed opening chord reverberate and echo through the air, but then shows its teeth as Alan Sparhawk's steel guitar cuts through with a slow, menacing arpeggio.

Mimi Parker shows restraint as she gently brushes on the snare, but there's a persistent, edgy tap on the cymbal that creates an air of unease and drives the song forward. Sparhawk's lead vocal is as smooth as ever, but when Parker joins on harmonies, the effect is utterly ethereal, with the K9 Pro ESS hanging onto every extended note.

Escalating that sense of menace to almost global proportions, the DAC's power is put to good use as Max Richter's *Last Days* erupts with a blare of horns, followed by the strings of the BBC Philharmonic, swirling dramatically in full Hollywood blockbuster mode. The strings are sharp and precise, but the K9 Pro ESS grasps the contrasts of the piece, allowing the slower melody of the brass to control the pace and create a sense of melancholy that underpins the orchestral flourishes.

I finish with something a little more mellow, as the slow pulse of bass guitar leads into Leonard Cohen's *Slow*. The FiiO catches the swagger of the bass with a slow, smooth rhythm, and the gravelly rumble of Cohen's voice as he declares: "slow is in my blood". There's a really light touch as the retro electronic keyboard adds some sharp chords to pick up the pace, and a rich gospel sound as the backing harmonies ring out with Cohen telling us he: "always liked it slow, never liked it fast".

Conclusion

The K9 Pro ESS will be overkill for many users who simply want a good DAC for their headphones. However, its sound quality and array of in and output options provide good value for money and allow the FiiO to act as the centrepiece of a larger audio or home entertainment system ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★½

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★☆

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

FEATURES
★★★★★

LIKE: Clear, precise sound; impressive connections; features

DISLIKE: Unclear documentation and app

WE SAY: The K9 Pro ESS provides excellent sound quality and connectivity

OVERALL
★★★★½

Pro-Ject
AUDIO SYSTEMS

Multi award winning Hi-Fi stereo

COLOURFUL AUDIO SYSTEM

● ● ● ● ● ●

IN THE BOX:

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Matching 2-way monitor speaker

Debut Carbon EVO
Best buy turntable

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Simply Red

This floorstander is compact and bijou, but at what cost? **David Vivian** reckons this could be the zero-compromise option

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Russell K Red 120Se

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
2.5-way floorstanding loudspeaker

WEIGHT
18kg

DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)
200 x 910 x 190mm

FEATURES
- 25mm soft dome tweeter
- 2x 127mm paper mid/bass drivers
- Quoted sensitivity: 86dB/1W/1m

DISTRIBUTOR
Russell K Ltd.

WEBSITE
russell-k.com

Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

Russell Kauffman is the most 'hands-on' speaker designer I know. When he drops off the Red 120Se for review he also brings in a dog-eared cardboard box and we spend half an hour listening to a motley collection of drive units simply held in his hand. Kauffman is keen to show me his *modus operandi* for auditioning drivers sans crossover and the attendant colourations introduced by a baffle and enclosure. It's laughably easy to hear the qualitative differences. My guess is when you're as intimately 'plugged in' to your product as that, iterative improvement becomes a matter of personal growth.

In any event, Kauffman is far from a conventional operator when it comes to speaker design. Despite its neatly orthodox appearance, the Red 120Se goes its own way under the skin. For example, as with the regular Red 120 (*HFC* 461), all the drive units are wired in positive phase, all diaphragms moving in unison in the same direction. This rather than having the tweeter connected in minus phase, as it is with most textbook designs, to smooth the transition from mid/bass driver to tweeter. Also key to the Kauffman method, phase must be optimised through the crossover region. His approach is to dispense crossover, response tuning, phase and impedance from one circuit.

Done right the perceived pay-off is claimed to be more rhythmically astute timing and musicality, aka the 'foot-tapping' thing. The intended upshot is that integration and focus improve to the extent you believe the sound is being delivered by a single driver and, moreover, remains stable as you move about the room. Speakers with the tweeter wired in minus phase invite the listener to focus more on hi-fi's technical aspects such as soundstage and tonality says Kauffman.

And then there's what he calls 'cabinet agility'. All Russell K enclosures are deliberately undamped. Traditionally damped cabinets seek to absorb energy radiated from the rear of the drivers and thus reduce what would otherwise be the cabinet's unwanted contributions of resonance and colouration.

> **In short, the uptick in fullness of the Red 120 is delivered with a new finesse**

According to Kauffman, damping stores energy, slows down the sound and makes it out of synch with the forward output of the driver. So fluffy wadding, thick-walled construction and anti-resonance internal cladding aren't just unnecessary but harmful. The Russell K way sees the box completing the sonic profile of the speaker, synergistically singing along in sympathy with the drivers, starting and stopping precisely when they do. In the case of the Red 120 and Red 120Se, strategically sited bracing shelves with holes in – one beneath each of the drivers – do the job. Each shelf has a different number of 'acoustically tuned' holes to confine the midrange to a dedicated section of the cabinet – forming a damping brake at around 100Hz – while allowing the rest of the system to breathe and relax when delivering the lower bass notes. Helping facilitate this is a vertical tube that passes through a fourth bracing shelf just above the reflex port that vents into a

Russell K
Russell K
RED 120

small chamber containing a second reflex port tuned as a system to an impressively deep 21Hz (24Hz for the regular Red 120).

What else distinguishes the SE from its older sibling? First, a superior tweeter. It remains a 25mm soft dome option with a ferrite magnet system and a copper clad aluminium voice coil wire on a fibreglass former and Faraday distortion-cancelling copper ring. But for the SE, a second magnet and a metal rather than plastic one is said to liberate more information and reinforce poise when the music gets dense and busy.

Crossover provision for the lower bass unit features two enclosed field iron core inductors instead of the regular 120's one – the first in the positive signal path and a second in the negative return path. This creates a balanced circuit with a coil before as well as after the voice coil of the lower bass unit. There are no measured benefits, but a perceived improvement in bass tunefulness.

Finally, a polymer insert has been added to the double plinth system, which is claimed to significantly improve isolation from the floor. Revised top-adjusting spikes seek to further enhance bass performance, soundstage, coherence and dynamics.

Sound quality

One of the pitfalls/joys of hi-fi reviewing – depends how open you are to learning on the job, no matter how long you've been doing it – is proclaiming a product to have nailed its brief so securely it's hard to imagine how it could be improved only for its maker to go and improve it, not by a little but by a lot.

It's the prospect I face here. When I reviewed Russell K's Red 120 mid-sized floorstander a few years back, I concluded, perhaps somewhat naïvely, that if you were willing to give bombastic, show-off speakers the swerve and more interested in having your neck tingled by the passion, emotion and musicianship on a recording, I was struggling to think of anything at the price that was as convincing as the Red 120.

I have a feeling I'm about to struggle no more, but we'll see. Here to restate the qualities that led to my original judgement, the regular Red 120 is back to face off against the new, more expensive Special Edition. Happily, it doesn't take long to realise that it remains a terrific compact floorstander and it's all to do with the potency of its core assets. As before, playing jazz bass legend Marcus Miller's *Trip-Trap* his Fender Jazz Bass has palpable body and depth but, more than that, appreciable character and quality. Low-frequency ambient energy within the live venue is just as tellingly rendered. Beyond the act of giving the 120's bass drivers a proper workout, it's easy to hear what makes Miller's technique a cut above, every giddying fretboard lick and run tracked with immaculate precision and timing.

Playing the same track via the 120Se, the musically virtuosic vibe is just as effortlessly captured but with a better sense of air and ambience. The midband's gains in clarity, timbral texture and openness are incremental but hard to mistake, while the very lowest notes have greater resolve and body. Overall tonality is subtly smoother, richer and warmer. In short, the uptick in fullness is delivered with a new finesse.

Next up a reprise of John Mayer's *Stitched Up*, the kind of supple, tautly tempo-ed track that bowls along with attitude and funk and is a sure-fire way to check out a speaker's capacity to master natural flow, tonal accuracy, top-to-bottom unity and rhythmic grip. With the Red 120, there's satisfying bass agility and weight, dynamic expression, midrange presence, vocal intelligibility, speed, grip and transparency. It reminds me why I felt I couldn't reasonably ask for more. And yet the Se easily shows where the track has more to give. Mayer's vocal delivery exhibits cleaner cut and nuance, the band heightened drive and 'juice'. No difference here is night and day, but things move along with a still greater sense of immediacy, verve and tonal colour and, perhaps most remarkably of all, a still more fluent and natural musical gait.

Conclusion

We should talk about price. When I reviewed the Red 120 it cost £3,000. That has since swelled to £4,700 and the Se is £5,950. Pretty steep inflation. Russell K is far from alone here, but is in a more fortunate position than most in being able to balance performance against price. Terrific as the Red 120 remains, the Se is the better speaker and for a floorstander of its size delivers the musical message with a veracity that's simply outstanding ●

HOW IT COMPARES

If you're going to spend £6k on a pair of floorstanders, you can certainly buy more imposing towers than the Red 120Se. Take Bowers & Wilkins £5,000 702 Signature (*HFC* 480). This tweeter-on-top design has no fewer than five drivers and looks simply stunning. It sounds big too, ensuring rousing renditions of music overflowing with copious space and impressive soundstaging. Another serious contender, Spendor's £4,500 D7.2 (also *HFC* 480) competes with the 120Se for realism and the ability to remain smooth and sophisticated.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★½

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

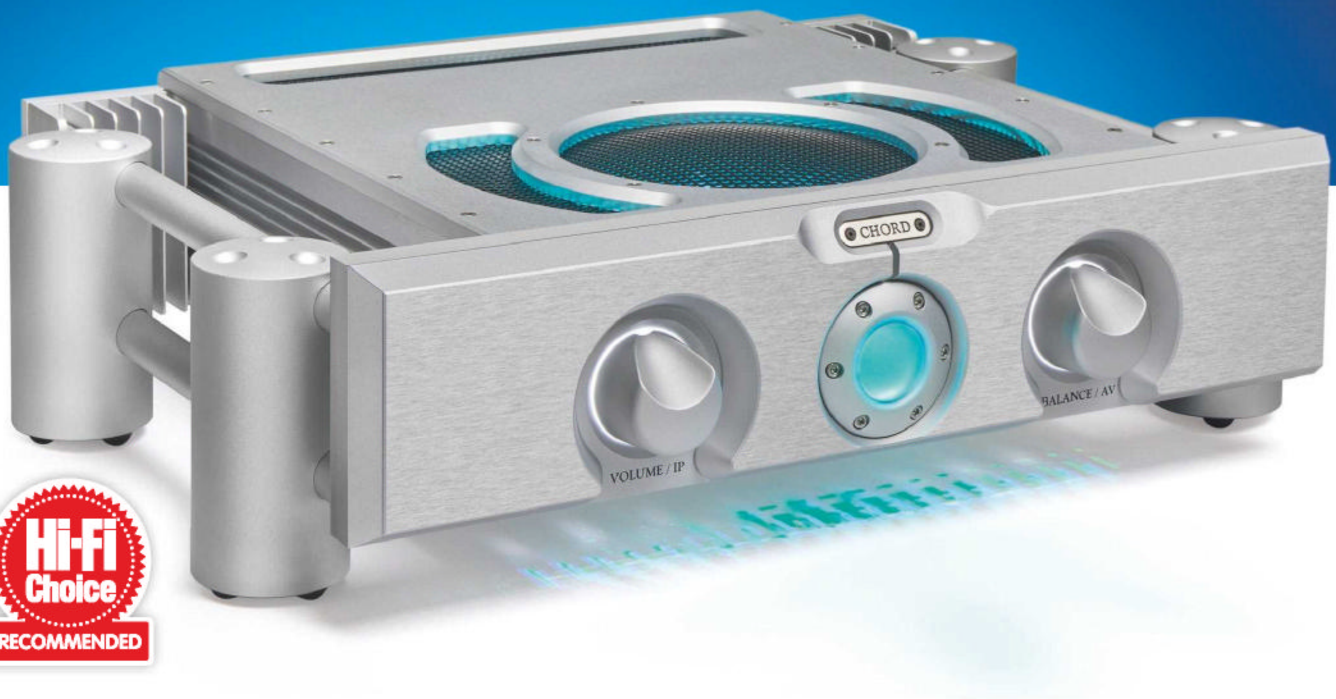
EASE OF DRIVE
★★★★½

LIKE: Musical believability; bass; svelte form factor

DISLIKE: Price hike

WE SAY: The competition around £6k is hot, but the Red 120Se has size and a unique skillset on its side – it's a true gem of a floorstander

OVERALL
★★★★★



First direct

Nick Tate test drives a purist stereo preamplifier with a difference and can't help but be supremely impressed

My design philosophy for a preamplifier is to keep all selectable audio signals perfectly preserved and buffered, to ensure they are not contaminated in any way from each other, or from external or internal radio-interference. And to make it enjoyable to use, of course." There you have it, straight from the horse's mouth so to speak, that's what Chord Electronics' John Franks set out to achieve with the Ultima Pre 3.

Newcomers to the brand will think of this Kent-based company as a DAC specialist. That's hardly surprising considering the huge success Chord has had, since the launch of its ground-breaking DAC 64 nearly two decades ago. Yet the company started up in 1989, to make high-end pre and power amplifiers.

Company founder Franks says the new preamplifier is largely a clean sheet design that's deliberately devoid of 'bells and whistles' like DACs, streamers, *etc*. To this end, he has specified very high-quality components and adopted audio engineering best practice. "It uses some of the most advanced high performance amplifier circuits that we have ever assessed and measured".

We're talking high-quality multi-layered circuitboards with screening and special low-noise switching power supplies. Despite the obvious attention to detail on the Ultima Pre 3's electronic design, its styling and ergonomics will really raise the eyebrows of prospective purchasers. To Franks, the user interface and aesthetics are just as important. It looks and feels special. The fascia sports a circular power on/off sphere with the company's trademark polychromatic lighting. To the left of this is a combined volume and input selector and to the right a combined balance and AV bypass control. There is nothing else on the fascia apart from this, making it refreshingly sparse and minimalist to look at. It's nice to use, too. The dual function selectors toggle between modes easily enough – although some users will prefer standard selectors. Nice as it is, there's always a sense of having to 'learn' a Chord product before using it becomes second nature. In terms of connectivity, there are five analogue inputs, two balanced XLR and three unbalanced RCA – plus a separate AV bypass input. The dual signal BUS seen on the Ultima 2 has gone. The quality of build and finish is what we have come to expect from Chord Electronics – in a word, superb.

It dissolves into the system and really gets to grips with what's played

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Chord Electronics Ultima Pre 3

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Preamplifier

WEIGHT
12.7kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
480 x 130 x 340mm

FEATURES
- Inputs: 2x XLR; 3x RCA
- Outputs: 1x XLR; 1x RCA; 1x AV; trigger

DISTRIBUTOR
Chord Electronics

WEBSITE
chordelectronics.co.uk

Sound quality

It isn't very hard to assess a preamp – just give it a really good source and see how much it takes away. To cut a long story short, the Ultima Pre 3 does very little of this at all. The result is an extremely enjoyable musical performance, regardless of the type of music. It dissolves into the system and really gets to grips with what's played.

Don't be fooled by its lavish build quality or characterful styling – in outright sound terms this preamp is truly top-tier – it just gets on with the job of making everything sound great, as well as making the rest of your system sound better. Especially via the balanced connections, it isn't about adding an attractive character to the sound, but rather stepping out of the way to let you hear what's really on the recording.

Take the way it handles a mediocre recording, for example. The Associates' *Club Country* is a classic slice of indie

rock from over 40 years ago, but it's hell on earth for any hi-fi that's tasked to reproduce it. Indeed, it's so bad that many would rather play it through a Sonos. It can sound brittle, midband-forward, opaque and murky; there's very little to commend its recording quality. Yet with the Ultima Pre 3 when driven by Chord's own Hugo TT2 (*HFC* 468) DAC, the different layers in the mix seem to gently unpeel, so it's suddenly possible to identify and follow all the respective instruments.

That's a sign of great transparency, a preamp that adds nothing in terms of brittleness or tonal edge, and instead cuts through the mix to tell the listener what's really going on. This is evident with Billy MacKenzie's distinctive, almost operatic vocals. Tonally they're hard and steely, and can really grate – especially when he belts out choruses. Yet the Ultima Pre 3 just gets on with things, letting that stark-sounding voice push forward and up, out into the room. It sounds icy alright, but not nasty.

The Ultima Pre 3 gives a nimble, lithe sound that's never slow out of the blocks

At the same time, there's no hint of nasal congestion; the Ultima Pre 3 is gentle, measured and forensically detailed. Play some mid-Seventies rock from The Eagles, such as *New Kid In Town*, and from the first bar you're able to feel the song's natural analogue warmth as well as the lovely rich timbre of the instruments. The Chord's neutrality means that the full flavour of the recording is allowed to flood out. Everything from the Fender Rhodes keyboards to the crispy sounds of the different electric guitars is clear to hear. Vocal harmonies are just lovely, so redolent of a sadly now-vanished time in music when they were considered wonderful things in themselves.

Despite this sun-drenched Seventies sound, there's a lot of energy going on and the preamp conveys this too – both in the dynamic crescendos of each chorus and the tight syncopation of the musicians. There's no sense of the track sounding slow or laboured whatsoever. Such rhythmic alacrity makes modern dance music huge fun. Set against my reference MF Audio Passive Pre, the Chord seems livelier and more fleet of foot when asked to play back classic nineties techno like K Klass' *Rhythm Is A Mystery*.

This 'banging' house track comes over with great speed and motive force. The Ultima Pre 3 gives a nimble, lithe sound that never sounds slow out of the blocks; it's well able to get into the groove and party. That's thanks in no small part to the preamp's very taut and dextrous bass; it delivers the song's synth bassline with great zeal and perfect timing. Further up the frequency spectrum everything is perfectly in time too; this preamp sounds seamless and self-effacing throughout the entire listening programme.

It's hard to pick faults. I have heard some designs, at significantly higher prices, sound more translucent with an even larger stereo soundstage than the Ultima Pre 3 is able to muster. Yet I don't think anything at or near its price comes close to its overall ability. You need to go to something with a radically different design – such as a top valve preamp or passive – to improve on it, and even then it's debatable.

Conclusion

Combining class-leading sound quality with an attractive and distinctive visual look and feel, Chord Electronics' Ultima Pre 3 preamp is – in three words – hard to beat. It's a real class act which, although expensive, still offers great value for money. If you're in the market for a product such as this, it's an essential listen ●

HOW IT COMPARES

Costing £12,000, Townshend's Allegri Reference isn't a direct price rival, but is arguably one of the very best-sounding preamps going. It's a passive transformer-based design with what's effectively active electronic volume control – which is very unusual. The result is something that sounds far more intricate and defined than traditional passives, but with great transparency. Yet the Ultima Pre 3 holds its own, coming close to its superlative sound at half the price. Just an ever-so-slight upper midband 'sheen' from the Chord offering really distinguishes them.

Around the back are five analogue inputs, two balanced XLRs and three unbalanced RCAs – plus a separate AV bypass input

L
R
1
2
3
4
5
A/V
O/P
TRIGGER O/PS
100 - 250 VAC

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	**LIKE:** Superb sound per pound; design; build quality
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★☆	**DISLIKE:** User interface not for everyone
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	**WE SAY:** Great value premium purist preamp
FEATURES ★★★★☆	

OVERALL ★★★★★

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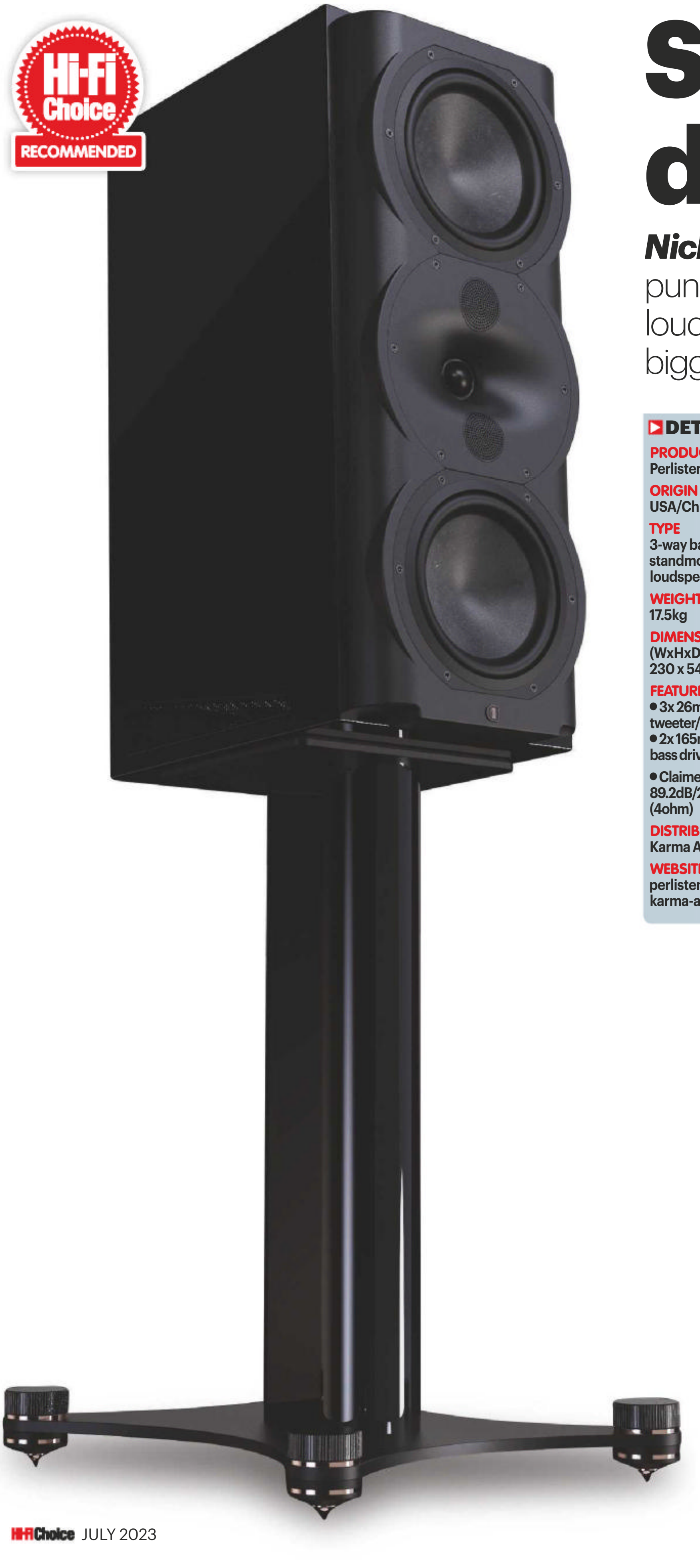


Stand and deliver!

Nick Tate auditions Perlisten's punchy-sounding R5m loudspeaker – one of the biggest standmounts going

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Perlisten R5m

ORIGIN
USA/China

TYPE
3-way bass reflex standmount loudspeaker

WEIGHT
17.5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
230 x 546 x 336mm

FEATURES
- 3x 26mm silk dome tweeter/mid array
- 2x 165mm HPF bass drivers
- Claimed sensitivity: 89.2dB/2.83v/1m (4ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Karma AV

WEBSITE
perlistenaudio.com
karma-av.co.uk

There are several things that mark out this loudspeaker as special, not least its physical proportions. The R5m is an imposing standmount that, when on its optional £1,350 stands, is considerably taller than most similarly priced floorstanders. Its other distinguishing feature is the fact that it uses multiple drive units; it's a three-way design with no less than five drivers – more of which later.

It forms part of Perlisten's middle-range R series, and is described as a 'monitor'. It certainly has the look of something that you might see in a recording studio.

The R series is a value-oriented version of the company's flagship S range. It's a totally bespoke design with no drive units bought-in off the shelf. Into its tall (for a standmount) cabinet is set Perlisten's Directivity Pattern Control (DPC) array, which comprises a single central 26mm silk dome tweeter set into a waveguide, with small midrange domes sitting immediately above and below. The company's Chief Technology Officer Erik Wiederholtz explains that these three work in unison from 1.3kHz to about 3kHz, above which the central tweeter handles all frequencies up to 20kHz and beyond.

The idea is to give a wide spread of sound where the ear is most sensitive (1kHz upwards), extending right up to a bat-bothering 30kHz, from three small drive units acting as pretty much a point source. These also have the benefit, according to Erik, of having much lower moving mass than a larger sized cone doing the same job. Also, a measure of time-alignment is included by the physical offset in distance from the centre tweeter to the two midrange domes – making for better phase coherence. Lower frequencies are delivered by a pair of 165mm HPF polymer drivers.

The cabinet is a sturdy thing, and comes in a choice of piano black or gloss white. The bass reflex port is downfiring, and for this to work there's an unusual arrangement at the bottom of the enclosure. The inner bottom panel is a little higher than the base, giving some free space for the air coming out of the port to propagate and exit via the side-facing vents. The gap between the lower port and the top of the stand is a known quantity, whereas with rear-facing ports the listener may have the speaker at any random distance from the rear boundary wall. This means that more consistent results can be achieved, with room placement playing less of a role in the quality of the bass produced. To further aid integration, port bungs are supplied to control bass boom.

Although its quoted sensitivity is pretty good, it has a 4ohm nominal impedance dropping down to a minimum of 2.7ohm. The latter figure is very low, meaning that although the R5m will go loud for any given number of watts, the amplifier driving it must do a lot of heavy lifting. Most modern amps should be able to cope with this, but some will struggle.

> **It sounds all-of-a-piece and never loses composure when things get really loud**

I find the R5m works well on its attractive optional matching speaker stands. In my room, I dispense with the port bungs and place both speakers around 25cm from my boundary wall, slightly toed-in. A Chord Hugo TT2 DAC is used for the bulk of testing, in conjunction with Exposure 3510 pre/power amplifiers (*HFC* 468 and 485 respectively), among others.

Sound quality

This is an extremely capable and well-rounded design that does an awful lot very well. However, you do need to ensure that it is properly positioned and driven by appropriate amplification. It needs lots of watts to really come out of its shell. Properly juiced up, however, the R5m is capable of great things.

Tonally it is reasonably neutral; there are no harsh, shouty bits up top, and the bass is pretty well controlled and impressively extended. Midband is clean and integrates well with the rest of the frequency range. There's a certain tonal dryness to the R5m; this isn't a speaker that will embellish the signal you're feeding it. Many will think this to be a good thing, others looking for a more romantic or 'sepia-tinged' presentation should look elsewhere. It certainly conveys the distinctively clean sound of Steely Dan's *Aja* very accurately.

Bass is impressive for standmount that's for sure. I can think of few others currently on sale that do better. It is deep, extended and controlled. There's no sign of any upper bass bump that some companies engineer into their standmounts to give the impression that they're bigger and bassier than they really are. Ultravox's *The Voice* is a case in point here; it has deep, grumbling bass that most standmounts don't bother with, but the R5m is up for the challenge. Even at high listening levels, it drives cleanly and the large amount of low frequencies it puts out doesn't seem to upset it or me in the least.

This loudspeaker's midband and treble performance is very good too – although here it faces stiff competition from other designs that do things equally well or better, in my view. It beautifully carries the opening synth of Pink Floyd's *Wish You Were Here*, offering a clean and detailed sound with an immediate and incisive feel. I can easily discern the lustrous analogue synthesiser sound and get a good sense of the brooding atmosphere around. However, the slightly more expensive Kerr Acoustic K300 Mk3 has a better sense of air and space, with a sparkle up top that's particularly apparent on hi-hat cymbals. The R5m's array works well, but still can't quite match the latter's ribbon tweeter.

Rhythmically the Perlisten is highly capable, but lacks an ultra-fast, firecracker sound. Instead it prefers to render everything in a clear, orderly and controlled way – so the listener can make sense of what's going on. Some rivals at this price come over with more zest and brio, but fall short with musically complex passages, whereas the reverse is true here. Timing is crisp and with plenty of pace when playing Haitink's reading of Vaughan Williams' *The London Symphony*. The *Lento – Allegro Risoluto* is lovely to hear, with lots of texture to strings and an enjoyable musical flow.

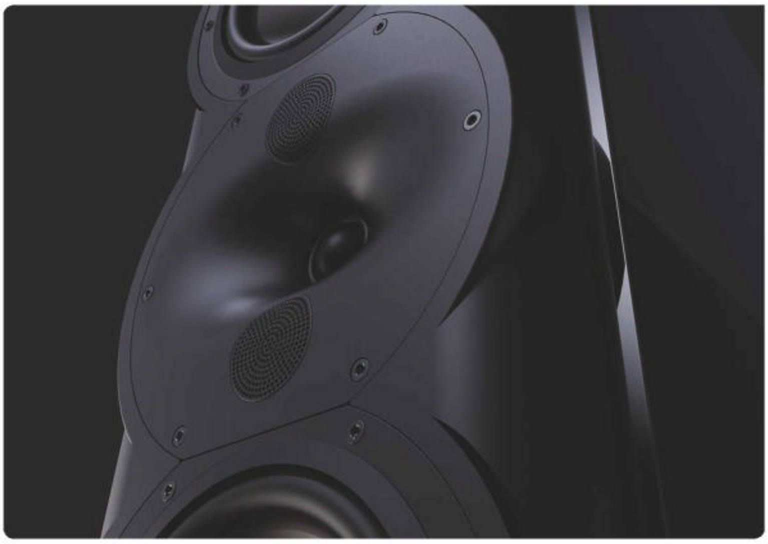
This recording also shows the speaker's ability with soundstaging. Played at lowish volumes, it sounds clean and tidy, but up the level and a cathedral-like soundstage appears. Given plenty of watts, the R5m really disappears into the room and gives a huge, three-dimensional recorded acoustic with accurate image location. Better still, it holds steady on transient peaks, continuing to sound all-of-a-piece and never losing composure when things get really loud. As such, it is best suited to larger rooms and higher listening levels – where it really comes out of its shell.

Conclusion

Perlisten's R5m may look a little quirky from a design point of view, but proves to be a highly able speaker. In a decent sized room with powerful amplification, it's an essential audition if you're after a serious, grown-up standmount ●

HOW IT COMPARES

At £6,700, Kerr Acoustic's K300 Mk3 is a bit more expensive, but sits alongside the Perlisten at the top of the premium standmount shortlist – for those looking for a big, gutsy, punchy sound. It doesn't quite have the bass articulation of the R5m, nor the consistency of sound at high listening levels, but at more real-world volumes it is slightly more transparent in the midband and clearer in the treble – with better sparkle to hi-hats, for example. It's also better suited to smaller listening rooms, where the R5m prefers larger ones. Both are excellent and well worth investigating.



The optional matching stands will set you back a further £1,350

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★☆

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE
★★★☆☆

LIKE: Powerful, engaging, wideband sound

DISLIKE: Expensive stands; hard to drive

WE SAY: A super standmount... on steroids

OVERALL
★★★★★

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THIS MONTH

ED SELLEY

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER
Active in the industry since 1999, Ed's first record was *Boss Drum* by The Shamen. He splits his time between reviewing and protecting hi-fi kit from his son Will.

NEVILLE ROBERTS

EXPERTISE: ENGINEER
Neville has an eclectic taste for classical baroque and jazz. His wife was forced to marry his transmission line speakers in the eighties and he collects BBC test card music.

JASON KENNEDY

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER
Editor of *HFC* from 1998 to 2001, Jason's first turntable was Rega's Planar 3 and Elvis' *40 Greatest Hits* was his first vinyl, so don't go stepping on his blue suede shoes.

DAVID PRICE

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER
DP two-finger typed his first hi-fi review 25 years ago. Since then he's edited *Hi-Fi World* and *HFC*. He describes himself as an "unreconstructed analogue addict".

CHRIS WARD

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER
Like his first kiss, Chris will never forget the sound of his first amp – an Aura Evolution VA-100. *War Of The Worlds* and Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours* were his first records.

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Feeling nostalgic

I'm an old American audiophile going back to the mid-Sixties. I just received the first issue of my new subscription to *HFC* and noted that it was the 500th one. That reminded me that decades ago I ordered some of your original mags, the ones that devoted an entire issue to testing a single product. I kept those old issues and when I counted them found I had 28 starting with number 10 going all the way up to issue 43.

I recall purchasing British magazines in those days wasn't as easy as it is today with the internet and international credit cards. Back then I had to get a money order from my bank and use snail mail. I ended up paying lots more for the money order than for the magazine and shipping. But I thought the concept of testing 40 to 50 similar products in one magazine cool and well worth it.

I had a good audiophile friend, Murray Zeligman, who was very creative designing unusual speakers, amps, just about everything. He made some money modifying Grado pickups in the Seventies. Murray was both a subjectivist and an objectivist. He ultimately listened, but he always tried to find measurements to correlate with what he heard. And sometimes he succeeded. One weekend I took him issue 10, done by the esteemed Martin Colloms, which was devoted to cartridges. At the bottom of each page was a graph with a frequency response curve, a separation curve and a 1kHz square wave. Murray quickly paged through the magazine able to see the graph, but unable to see the name of the pickup. He suddenly stopped at page 103 and I still recall his words: "I want that cartridge; I know how it sounds". The graph was exactly the type of measurements he had done on the Grado pickup. It was a Technics EPC-205C MKIII. It wasn't available in the US so we imported a pair. And it turned out to be just what my friend expected. It was a great cartridge and as a moving magnet, an inexpensive one. I still use one occasionally today.

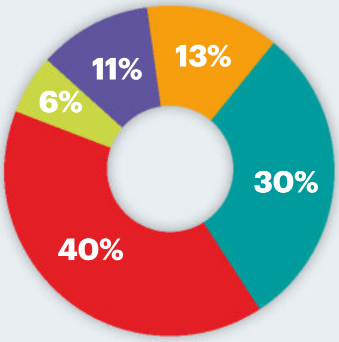
Anyway, congratulations on 500 issues and I hope you enjoyed my little bit of nostalgia.

Allen Edelstein, New Jersey, USA

WE ASKED...

How do you get your music?

- 🟥 **Streaming**
- 🟨 **HMV**
- 🟪 **Secondhand record shops**
- 🟧 **Digital downloads**
- 🟦 **Independent record stores**



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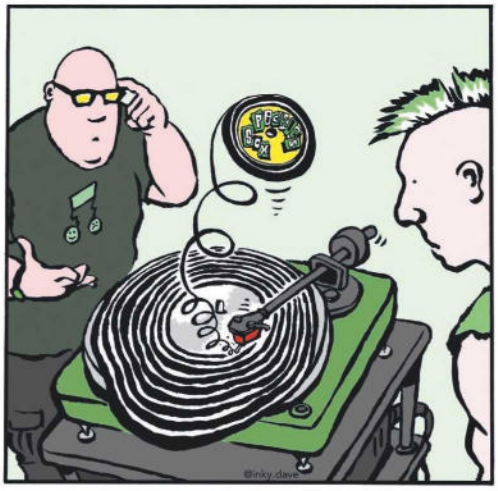

"Think the tracking weight is a tad high"

DP: Great story, thanks Allen. I still have an EPC-205C MKIII in its original Technics headshell and it's an exceptional performer even by today's standards. Given that cartridges have generally improved a lot since those days, it must have been a revelation when first launched at the end of the Seventies! It cost £69 when new in 1979, half the price of most high-end moving coils, but was beautifully made and included an ultra-low mass Boron cantilever, which plays a big part in its overall sound and tracking ability. I used it a few years ago in my review of the (then) new Technics SL-1000R turntable system – for our sister magazine *Hi-Fi News*. Its editor, Paul Miller, was extremely impressed by its sound, too. Hang on to yours.

JK: Thanks for getting in touch and sharing your memories of those epic ▶

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A5 copies of *HFC*, they were very popular at the time and remain a fascinating catalogue of hi-fi in the Eighties. Interesting what you say about the response of that cartridge, the Japanese were and still are pretty savvy when it comes to cartridge building and having the might of Panasonic behind the development must have been a real advantage.

CW: I really enjoyed your letter, particularly the reference to 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity'. I think these two words encapsulate hi-fi perfectly. Some qualities of accuracy can be empirically measured, while other parameters we value seem to defy measurement. For me, the greatest joy is from embracing qualities that can be measured alongside a kind of latitude to respond in the moment to the sound I hear. The whole nature of system matching, and indeed system matching to an acoustic space is an art as much as a science.

LETTER OF THE MONTH

CD replacement

My present system consists of a Manticore Mantra turntable, Logic Datum II tonearm with a Sumiko Rainier cartridge playing through a Musical Fidelity M3si amp and a pair of Triangle Esprit Comete Ez speakers. I also have a Sony CDP-XE300 CD player, which although getting on in years still gives a good account of itself. Also a Sony MDS-JE530 Minidisc player via an Audio Alchemy digital decoding engine.

Since upgrading my system with a cartridge, amp and speakers – it's now a real cracker – I would appreciate your views of replacing the Sony CD player with the matching Musical Fidelity M3CD player. In other words, do you think the difference between the two will be very noticeable?

I ask you guys this question as I am 82 and it is not easy to get about to audition hi-fi equipment so I rely on you for buying advice to help me narrow down the field.

Keith J Collier, Crewe

DP: Having heard both the Musical Fidelity and Sony CD players, I'd say that the former will be a noticeable upgrade on the latter. The Sony is a little flat in spatial terms and rather 'matter of fact' in the way it plays music. It doesn't make any terrible mistakes, but doesn't excite any passions either. The Musical Fidelity is a more musically expressive performer that carries rhythm and dynamics better and also a more pleasingly warm and natural tonality. It sounds less plasticky than the Sony. There won't be a massive improvement, but it's worth changing in my opinion.

CW: Personally, I'm a fan of Sony CD players, so if there are no faults I'd be minded to stay put with the Sony. In my experience different CD players may only offer a relatively modest change in character rather than a sea change in performance. Naturally, some like their components to visually match, but I'd major on the sonics.

I would appreciate your views on updating my aging Sony CD player

ES: It has been a while since I've heard any Sony CD player of that vintage, but I imagine that the Musical Fidelity will count as a step forward simply because, even when 'only' dealing with 16-bit/44.1kHz CD resolution, modern DAC chips have made a significant leap over older models. There's also the secondary consideration that buying a new CD player will give you peace of mind that there will be service support for it for the foreseeable future as well. Don't forget, if the Audio Alchemy has a spare input, there are CD transports from Audiolab, Roksan and Cambridge Audio that can work into that too.

Roon for improvement

This is the first time I have ever written to you after so many years of reading your excellent

Musical Fidelity's M3CD deck has a pleasingly warm and natural tonality

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> - AV Audio Editor July 2021
>
> ENTERPRISE REVIEW

You might be sceptical that a tonearm could tranform your system, but the editor of Av Audio found that the Enterprise Mk4 tonearm made more difference to his system than anything else. More difference than many other outstanding analogue products, including a world renowned £17,000 phono stage and £8000 cartridge.

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– John Stratton (Owner)

ENTERPRISE TONEARM

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– Stereo Times

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– 6 Moons

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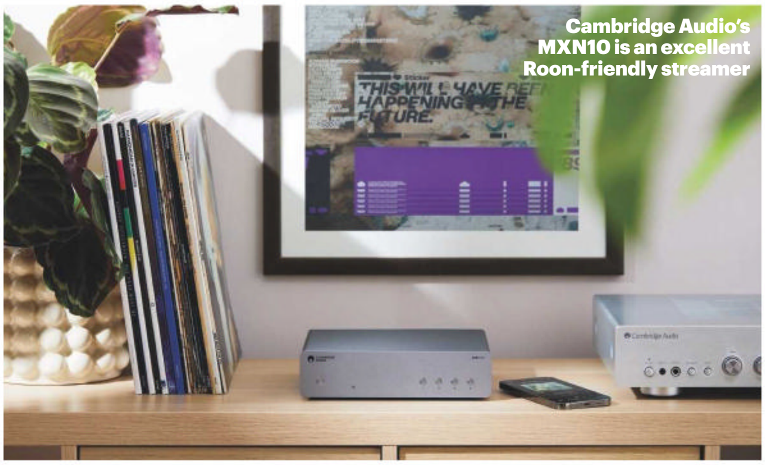

Cambridge Audio's MXN10 is an excellent Roon-friendly streamer

magazine! I seem to have got myself into a bit of a mess with Roon, streaming, music servers and so on, and have recently come to the conclusion that I may have made a mistake some years ago when I first purchased the original KEF LS50 Wireless active speakers. While the star ratings of products (and of course the reviews) are very helpful, I understand that star ratings relate to the 'class' of product – such that you are comparing like with like. Clearly, a five-star £200 amplifier is not going to sound as good as a five-star £1,000 amplifier. I just need to ensure that a combination of a five-star integrated amp and a five-star pair of speakers is going to sound at least as good – and certainly no worse – than the five-star KEFs!?

My system: I currently have a Rega Planar 6/Ania turntable, Cyrus CDi-XR player, Innuos ZENMini Mk3 server (set up as a Roon Core) – all plugged into the KEFs. It all works fine and sounds good, but the 'main' speaker needs to be right next to the hi-fi rack for cabling purposes, which is far from ideal given the limitations of my room. I would rather have everything plugged into an amplifier, and have the speakers placed wherever I fancy.

I was taken with your review of the Rega Elex Mk4 (*HFC* 500) and am also interested in the Audiolab 7000A. I am not so sure about speakers, but have tended to stick to B&W for many years, with KEF in the mix too. My question is: would a combination of the Rega amp (or similar) and B&W or KEF speakers costing about £1,000 sound as good – or better – than the KEF LS50? The question also arises about Roon compatibility, which has been driving me nuts, to the point where I was thinking about giving up Roon altogether. But I enjoy it so much, and I use it with the HomePod in the kitchen and my Oppo 4K player (with Yamaha amp) in the living room A/V system. The Oppo is Roon Ready and I very much value the utility and convenience of that.

I kind-of assume I will need a streamer in the mix and further assume the Cambridge CXN V2 will be adequate – and is Roon Ready. I see you that you have reviewed the HiFi Rose 'everything in a box', which seems like a major fly in the ointment to confuse me even further. I guess with that I could keep the KEFs?

Colin Anderson, by email

> Roon compatibility has been driving me to the point where I might have to ditch it

***ES*:** This is a slightly 'finger in the wind' guess of an answer, Colin, because while I've tested both the active and passive LS50 Meta and the Rega, they've never been in the same place at once. I suspect that the Elex Mk4 (*HFC* 500) and passive LS50 would be able to equal the wireless version. I'd also suggest you look at Q Acoustics' Concept 30 as I've preferred it to the KEF on the times I've tested it. I would also say that the new Audiolab 7000A integrated amp is sensational – very nearly as good as the Rega while costing less and doing more.

The good news is that you can make a saving on a Roon-friendly streamer. The Cambridge Audio MXN10 (see p46) is seriously good, completely Roon compatible and will save you a

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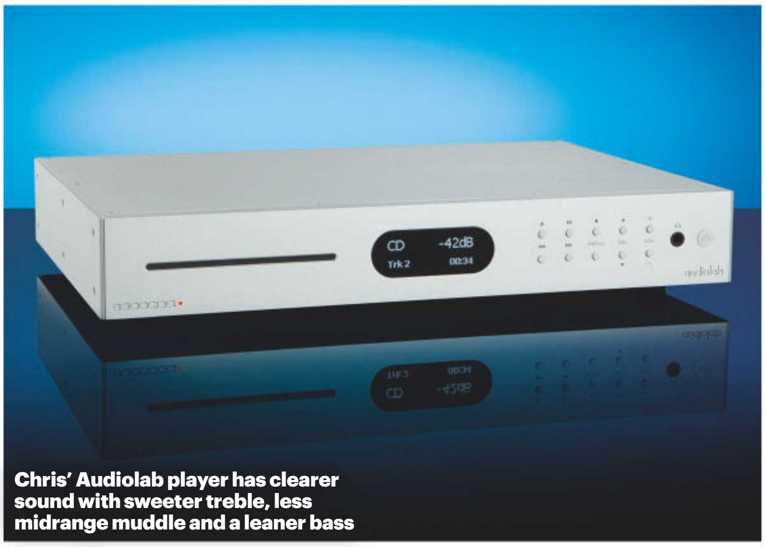

Chris' Audiolab player has clearer sound with sweeter treble, less midrange muddle and a leaner bass

couple of hundred pounds which might make the business of building a system a little easier.

CW: I feel for you. I think the starting point is not regretting your previous sensible choices. Each decision in the past was based upon your best reading of the facts. The beauty of active loudspeakers is that the designer has already perfectly optimised the amplification with the box and the drivers. However, you'll note that KEF has moved to a choice between traditional passive loudspeakers or wireless loudspeakers, so maybe it recognised the limitations of signal-based wiring.

Starting again is a fresh start, but also throws up a new set of challenges. I have no doubt that a new Rega amp with new B&W/KEF loudspeakers could put you in an equivalent or potentially better place, especially if you can sell your existing KEFs for decent money. But before you make this leap, maybe just double check you can't change the orientation of your system first. It's easy to get into a rut of where one places one's hi-fi, but just double check you can't mix things up and hear the difference. As for your Roon challenges it sounds like you love it too much to abandon it, but I think I'd focus on getting the core acoustics of your system on song before biting off more tech challenges.

JK: Unless I am missing something, it looks like the simplest solution to your dilemma would be to get a longer cable to connect the system to the master speaker. The Rega Elex Mk4 with, say, a pair of PMC twenty5.21i would probably sound better, but the KEF LS50 is a decent wireless loudspeaker and its active operation gives it certain advantages.

Back for more

Many thanks for publishing my letter and for all the advice. Between writing to you and it being published, I set off on the audition route. Unfortunately, it seems that home demos are a no-no at this price so I had to make do with speakers I was unfamiliar with and the shops' staff were all way too young to have heard (or even heard of) my Ruark Prologues! The Audiolab 8300CDQ did cross my radar and I emailed Steve Hughes at Audiolab who was very helpful (thanks Steve) and informed me this model was no longer current, but that if I was interested auditioning the 9000A and CDT – which I did – would provide a similar experience.

Check if you can change your setup's orientation and hear an improvement

Well after the various auditions and advice from your good selves, coins of the realm have changed hands and I am now the owner of an Audiolab 8300CDQ, connected to the mains by my mains lead prize from Russ Andrews (many thanks to you)! Initial thoughts are that the sound is clearer with sweeter treble, less midrange muddle and a leaner bass. As the 8300 effectively replaces the CD transport, DAC and preamp, it's difficult to identify where the main improvement lies. However, the first serious listening (after burning-in the Audiolab for 48

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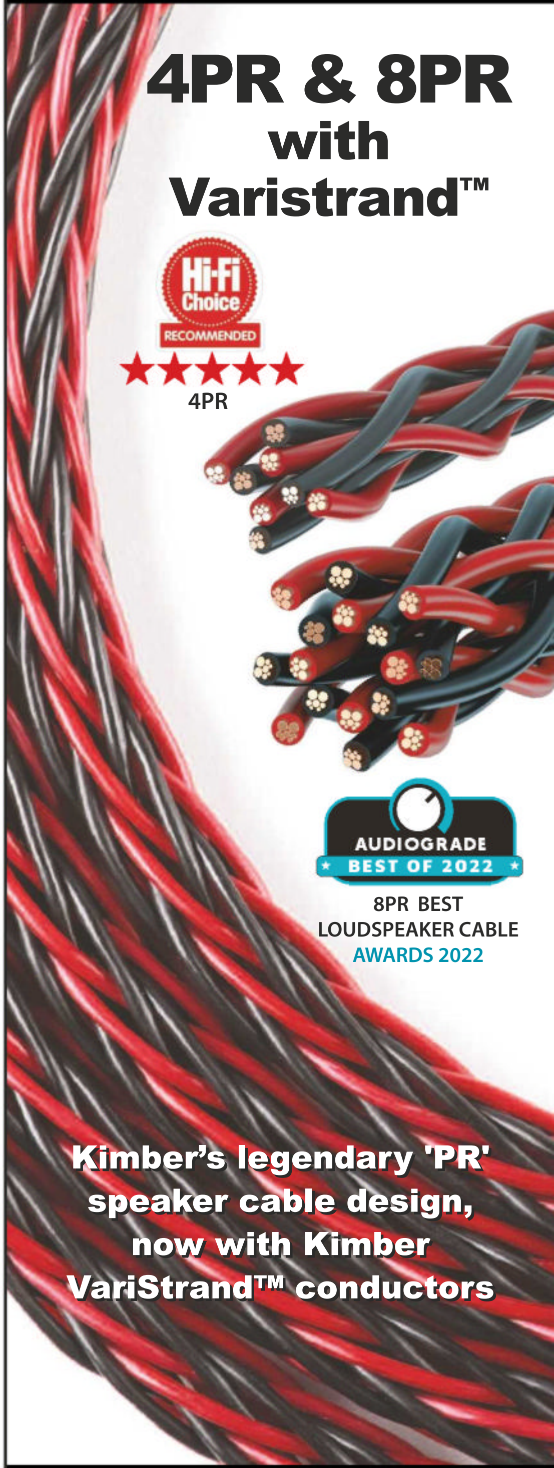
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hours) was done via phono interconnects to the Sony, but when the XLR interconnects (courtesy of QED) arrived, clarity and timing improved still further.

I'm afraid that I didn't go for a turntable (sorry Neville) as I have a collection of just under 5,500 silver discs! I largely gave up on vinyl in the late Eighties, not through any misplaced belief in "perfect sound forever" but because the quality of vinyl pressings at that time was abysmal. It was not unusual to have to return an LP three or four times to get a decent copy. Incidentally, while reviewers of the day were debating the various pros and cons of the "brash and shouty" (my description) Sony CD player or the laid back and mellow (soporific to my taste) Philips, I settled on the virtually unheard-of Hitachi DA1000. This CD player trod a path between the presentation of Sony and Philips and was unusual in that it had a half-width, double-height chassis that front loaded the CD and spun it vertically.

Once again, many thanks for publishing my letter and for your invaluable advice. Keep up the good work with the mag. I'll be sure to get in touch again for advice when the Sony power amp finally meets its maker. I've always fancied a Krell...

Chris Moxham, by email

DP: The Hitachi DA-1000 was very underrated, back in those days. I have one in my collection – the second issue with the Burr Brown DAC – and it's still lots of fun to listen to by today's standards. It lacks focus and detail, but has a very musical sound and a strong, bouncy bass that makes a lot of modern machines seem quite anaemic. Also, you've got to love its peculiar frontal disc-loading system, and Eighties-tastic 'Knight Rider' dashboard! Still, I'm sure your Audiolab 8300CDQ sounds considerably better as an all-round proposition – and well done for sticking with CD. Streaming may work well for many, but I still think it doesn't sound as good as a serious silver disc spinner in most situations.

JK: An interesting blast from the past. I also remember that Hitachi, it may have been the first CD player I heard in fact, but I didn't realise that it was voiced in the way you mention. Glad to hear that you have arrived at a more revealing and entertaining sound with the Audiolab. As for a Krell, it doesn't seem to have quite the presence that it once did, I'm not sure if this is because of marketing or the fact that there are so many decent high-power amplifiers available on the market today. If I was looking for one at a sensible price I would consider ATC.

CW: I love the idea of the Hitachi CD player going vertical for front loading. Sometimes it's the breaking of received wisdoms that causes the greatest leaps in innovation. The real estate on my hi-fi sideboard is precious and I regularly dream of going up, rather than extending ever wider.

Streaming has its benefits but doesn't sound as good as a serious CD player

ES: I'm glad that the Audiolab did the trick. It's more a reflection that the company is gently shifting its product philosophy than any issue with the 8300 that it is discontinued. It's a cracking bit of kit and I hope it keeps delivering for years to come.

NR: Fair enough – I can see why you're committed to CD with 5,500 of them! Like you, I returned most LPs I purchased in the later Seventies through to the Eighties at least once (the poor owner of my local record shop's heart sank when I turned up). That was definitely a low point for vinyl as the quality control was not good. Fortunately, things have changed for the better now. I'm also pleased to hear that you appreciate the value of good mains leads and interconnects – they can be a very cost-effective way of upgrading your audio system.

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Floorstanders

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Reproducing low frequencies requires large movements of air that smaller cabinets are unable to achieve

As with any hi-fi component, when it comes to buying loudspeakers the most tempting urge is to simply get the best-looking, biggest and most-expensive option that your budget will allow. While sometimes this approach can come up trumps, it's never really that simple and a little research and a lot of auditioning is the smart way to go. Plus you'll also need to consider other factors such as the size and shape of your listening room, where your speakers will be placed and the other components you'll be partnering them with. But hold that thought, first it's time for a history lesson...

Back in the beginnings of home audio, horn loudspeakers were made for use with radios and were usually separate from the radio itself. This was a derivative of the horns fitted to early phonographs, which were purely mechanical reproduction devices. It was the invention of the Audion triode amplifying valve by Dr Lee de Forest in 1906 that changed everything and paved the way for the development of the paper cone loudspeaker drivers that were introduced in the mid-Twenties. As radio cabinets began to be made larger to enclose both the electronics and the loudspeaker, designers discovered that the enclosure had a major effect on the bass response of the speaker. And so a brave new world of experimentation with various different designs of enclosure began.

Up until the late-Fifties, high-quality home loudspeakers were all floorstanding while smaller alternatives had a reputation for being cheaper and offering poor audio quality. That all changed in the Sixties as some manufacturers began to make more compact high-fidelity speakers and technical advancements, along with improvements in amplifiers, resulted in high-quality bookshelf models. Nevertheless, it's always been a fact of physics that reproducing low frequencies requires large movements of air that a smaller cabinet will never be able to achieve.

> **Some believe that running separate cables for bass and midrange results in better sound**

Apart from the obvious problem of size, one of the main issues with floorstanding speakers is that the cabinets are large and can make tiny movements. This can result in unwanted resonances that need to be eliminated, which is where the importance of internal bracing comes into play.

Early drive units were simply mounted on an open baffle, or a piece of braced wood with a hole in it to accommodate the driver. Apart from being cheap to produce, this allowed the electronics (which produced significant heat) to have free air flow from the rear of the enclosure. The snag with this approach is that the cone and its suspension of the drive unit has its own natural resonant frequency, which can cause unwanted peaks in the response curve. It's for this reason that cabinets are designed specifically to meet the requirements of the drive units.

Loudspeakers invariably contain multiple drivers designed to handle different bands of audio frequencies. The bass driver, or 'woofer' is the largest and is designed to move the volume of air required to reproduce low frequencies. Meanwhile, the tweeter caters for the high-frequencies at the top end. Optionally, a midrange driver covers the midband frequencies. This requires a relatively small enclosure while the tweeter's enclosure is often part of the drive unit itself. So, the bulk of the loudspeaker cabinet is usually designed to support the woofer, which is where a floorstander comes into its own.

Infinite baffle designs

One of the simplest cabinet designs is the sealed box or infinite baffle. Here, the driver is mounted in a very large sealed enclosure. Conceptually, an infinite baffle is a flat baffle that extends out to infinity in both directions. While a genuine infinite baffle remains effectively impossible, a very large baffle such as the wall of a room can be considered to be a practical equivalent. A genuine infinite baffle loudspeaker has an infinite volume, but in practice, an infinite-baffle loudspeaker is a speaker enclosed in a box large enough for it to behave as if the drive unit is mounted in a genuine infinite baffle. Noting that the sound radiation from the rear of a cone is out of phase with the radiation from the front, the infinite baffle effectively isolates the sound from the rear of the cone and this can be dissipated by wadding in the enclosure that effectively converts this energy into heat. However, this doesn't address the issue of the cone's resonance.

A bass-reflex loudspeaker is a sealed enclosure that has a vent or port to improve the low-frequency output while taming the natural resonance of the driver. The dimensions of the enclosure and port have to be carefully calculated and matched to the driver. The port exploits the principles of a

Some cabinets (such as this Focal Theva) are tilted for optimum time alignment

Helmholtz resonator to dampen the driver's resonance. The port tuning frequency is a function of its cross section and length. As with all sealed enclosures, the box may be empty, lined or filled with damping materials. This enclosure type is common and is more efficient than a sealed enclosure of the same volume, making it suitable for both bookshelf and floorstanding designs.

A variation of the bass-reflex enclosure is the passive radiator speaker. This uses a second passive driver (another cone unit that has no voice coil), also known as an auxiliary bass radiator. It provides a similar low-frequency extension and control of resonance to a ported enclosure. The passive driver moves in response to changing pressures inside the enclosure.

Transmission line

A transmission line enclosure has, in theory, an infinitely long line that is stuffed with absorbent material so that all the rear radiation of the driver is fully absorbed, down to the lowest frequencies. A practical transmission line is a tapered enclosure whose length is around a quarter of the wavelength of the resonant frequency of the woofer. The line is folded so that the far end exits at the front of the speaker and exploits the fact that the sound undergoes a 180° phase shift through the quarter-wave line and – as the sound from the rear of the cone is 180° out of phase compared with the front – it reinforces the bass below resonance. With careful design and damping at strategic points within the line, it also damps out the natural resonance of the woofer to provide a very flat and well-extended bass response. Among the first examples of this enclosure design approach were proposed by Dr AR Bailey and AH Radford in *Wireless World* magazine in 1965 and by Chris Rogers in *Practical Hi-Fi and Audio* in 1976, as well as the commercial designs, such as those from IMF Electronics, which received critical acclaim at the time.

Bass-reflex speakers have a sealed enclosure with a port to improve low-frequency output

As previously mentioned, most speakers employ multiple drivers to cover the entire audio spectrum. Budget speakers may opt for a single drive unit or one-way design. The drive unit is a full-range driver that has a dome in the centre to radiate the high frequencies, leaving the cone to transmit the bass and midrange frequencies.

Two-way designs have a separate bass driver and tweeter to handle the lower and higher frequencies respectively. The advantage of this approach is that each drive unit can be designed to handle a narrower band of frequencies and so doesn't have to make the necessary compromises to handle the full audio spectrum. However, an additional passive electronic circuit, or crossover network, has to be included to make sure the correct range of frequencies is fed to the appropriate drive unit. A crossover consists of capacitors, inductors and resistors and high-quality components are required to work at the power levels found in a speaker.

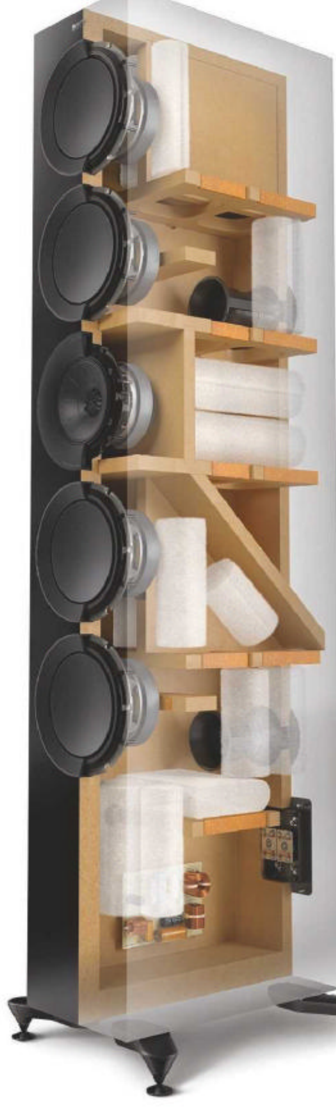
Multiple drive units

The crossover network is more complex on three-way loudspeakers as it has to separate three bands of frequencies. A variation on the three-way speaker, the 2.5-way has the midrange and high frequencies filtered from the woofer while the bass is not filtered from the midrange. This requires a simpler (and cheaper) crossover than a three-way design, although the midrange driver will receive the bass frequencies in addition to the midrange frequencies. This can sometimes make the midrange sound slightly muddy.

Having multiple drive units allows bi-wiring and tri-wiring. This means that a separate speaker wire can be used for the different band of frequencies of the drive units and is accommodated by simple modifications to the crossover design. Some believe that running a separate speaker cable for the bass connection and another for the midrange and treble results in an improvement in sound quality, but of course this requires twice the amount of speaker cable, and so can be costly.

Whatever type of floorstander you choose, the same advice as always applies: try to audition your preferred models in your listening room before making a final decision, as they are a key component of your audio system and play a significant part in the sonic capabilities of your setup ●

Internal bracing eliminates unwanted resonances from the different drivers



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Music while you work

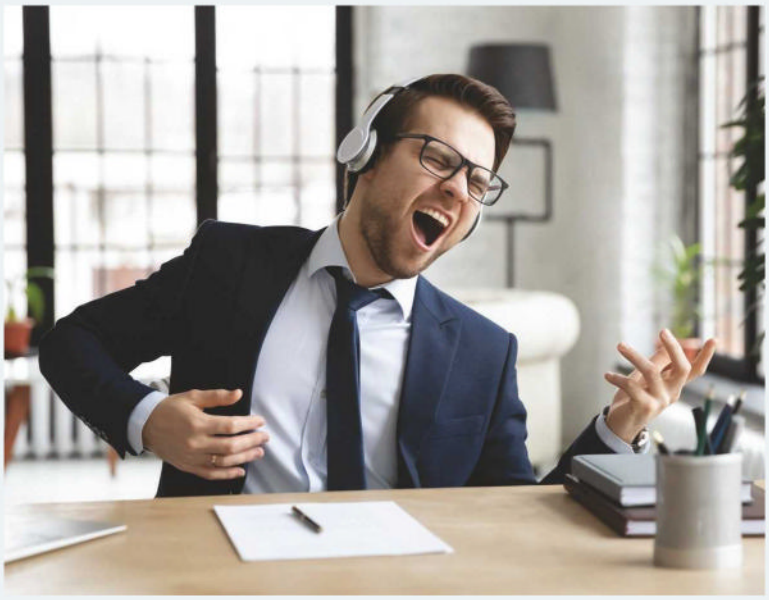
Does it help to listen to music while you are concentrating on other things, such as writing? **Neville Roberts** finds that there is no clear-cut answer

Some studies have suggested that listening to classical music can improve your hearing, spatial reasoning skills and intelligence. This has been called 'The Mozart Effect' and was first reported in 1993 by scientists at the University of California. One group was asked to listen to Mozart's *Sonata For Two Pianos* for 10 minutes, while another group remained in silence. It was found that those who had listened to the music subsequently showed significantly increased spatial reasoning skills for 10-15 minutes. This encouraged some crèches in the US to start playing classical music to children. Shortly after the study came out, the southern state of Georgia even started giving newborn babies a free classical CD!

A later test was carried out on two groups of rats – one exposed to the Mozart sonata and the other some minimalist music by Philip Glass. Both were then tested for their ability to find their way through a maze. The researchers found the Mozart group completed the maze quicker and with fewer errors than the Philip Glass one, and they concluded that the musical complexity of Mozart's music had a positive impact on spatial reasoning. Later research on the Mozart Effect focused on listening to music while working on other tasks, such as studying or writing. Critics of the theory argued that improved performance was due to 'enjoyment arousal' – reasoning was enhanced due to the enjoyment of the music, not because of any effect on the brain. They maintained that cognitive abilities had not actually been improved. The scientists themselves suggested that the basic activity of listening to music activated areas of the brain concerned with spatial reasoning, so the result might be more accurately named 'The Music Effect'.

There is evidence that music with words can impair memory function

More recently in 2017 at a conference discussing the neuroscience of learning, the speakers concluded that our brains are unable to multi-task and that doing two things at the same time has a negative impact on performance. One of the attendees at the conference was a tutor of writing who asked the speakers specifically if we should listen to music while writing and the response was an unequivocal no. The view was that music, especially music with lyrics, hinders concentration. Interestingly, some of the students subsequently told the tutor that they liked listening to music while writing and that it made them more focused and productive.



Listening to music while working can help, but there's also the risk you'll look ridiculous

In June 1940, the BBC General Forces Programme broadcast *Music While You Work* twice daily to increase the productivity of workers. The programme was so popular it continued to be broadcast right up until September 1967. The theory is that if you are doing a boring, repetitive task, listening to music increases productivity. One of the reasons suggested for this is that it puts us in a better mood, which helps us stay focused and productive.

Other studies have found that writers type slower while listening to music. There is also evidence that music with words impairs memory function and reduces reading comprehension. The results were slightly different for writers with a musical background who tended to write longer sentences and have better sentence structure.

Atomic kitten

When I was at university I used to revise while listening to music playing in the background. It made the atomic physics revision more enjoyable, but whether it improved my understanding of the subject is questionable. Now, listening to music reduces my ability to concentrate on writing, so while typing this I am sitting in silence.

So, the answer to whether you should listen to music while working is not as clear cut as researchers thought. It's down to personal choice. Generally speaking, research suggests that it can interfere with activities like writing and the understanding of difficult concepts. If you do want to listen to music, choose something non-vocal or quiet. See what works for you and go with that ●

NEVILLE ROBERTS
Silence is golden

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Nurse, the screens!

Nigel Williamson decides to give his brain and eyeballs a rest by logging off and returning to an analogue lifestyle. What could possibly go wrong?

How many of you have ever attempted the digital detox? Take a total break from screens and social media, Skype and Zoom, Face Time, Twitter, WhatsApp groups, streaming services, emails and computer games. Dig out those vinyl LPs from the back of the cupboard instead of clicking on Spotify. Pick up a phone instead of sending a text or email. Better still, meet for a coffee. Disconnect to reconnect and live your life in real time. As for dating, forget Tinder. No more swiping right and swiping left. Get out there and meet someone in a bar, as we used to do in the days when I was still young and vaguely attractive.

The theory – which research seems to back up – is that by switching off our screens and reconnecting with the physical world, we can reduce the stress and anxiety levels in our life. A 'turn off, tune out and drop in' exercise that will improve work/life balance, sleep patterns and mental health. Does it work? Well, I recently tried it for five days with mixed results. But we'll come to that in a moment.

During lockdown, screen time increased when it was the only way of keeping in touch. Yet now we're free to leave home and socialise again, it seems that the bad habits we acquired under house arrest have proved hard to shake off.

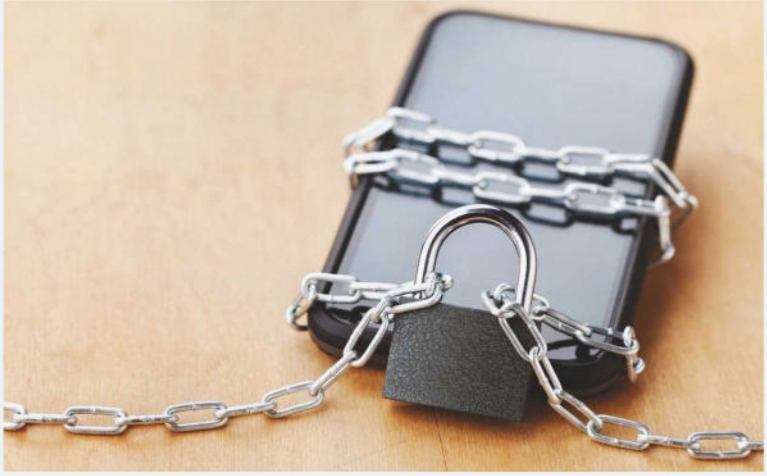
A recent survey showed that most of us are using screens considerably more than we did before the pandemic – and more than half of us spend 11 hours or more each day looking at them.

> **By day three I was getting itchy, so decided to get out of the house**

Hold that number. If we sleep for eight hours and stare at a screen for another dozen how much time does that leave for conversing with loved ones, debating the state of the world over a pint in the local pub, visiting a theatre or concert hall, reading a book or a magazine and all the other interactions and infractions that used to constitute our pre-digital lives?

Day one of my detox was a Monday and felt like I was on vacation. I'd cheated by working over the weekend and getting ahead of all the deadlines I had to meet over the coming week so ignoring emails was easy enough. When I volunteered to collect the grandchildren from school, they joined me in detox. Instead of playing computer games on their tablets, we played Dobble and Bird Bingo.

When I got home that night I slept like a log and woke on Tuesday morning feeling as good as the Nina Simone song, all stress and anxiety banished. As the second day went on, though, I began to wonder what vital emails I was missing. I resisted the temptation to check and buried myself in George Eliot's *Silas Marner*, a book that I read at university many years ago and had always promised myself that one day I would revisit. While I was reading I got out a pile of old vinyl albums, cranked up the record player and luxuriated in nostalgia, listening to Little Feat, the Grateful Dead and Joni Mitchell.


There are clear benefits to going analogue for a few days

By day three I was getting itchy, so decided to get out of the house. I did the weekly shop at the supermarket instead of having the groceries delivered and arranged to meet a friend for lunch.

Feel the fear

I made it through day four although 'FOMO' (fear of missing out) was definitely starting to worry me. On the Friday – day five – I cracked and checked my emails for the first time all week. A national newspaper had asked for 1,200 words and Times Radio had invited me to appear on Mariella Frostrup's show.

I messaged back but, of course, it was too late and the gigs had gone. My digital detox had cost me a sum in the region of £500 – a cheap enough price for a week's de-stressing, I guess.

And the conclusion? I'd say my personal welfare definitely benefited from the detox, but there was no denying my working life had suffered. Having not responded to those emails, would they ask someone else next time?

Nevertheless, putting my tech dependency into perspective has brought long-term benefits. Although I'm now firmly back in the digital world, I have deleted several dozen apps, given up Facebook and Twitter, started visiting the local stores rather than shopping online and make a point of talking to people rather than messaging them.

I'd call that a result. Just don't ask me to do it again… ●

NIGEL WILLIAMSON
Paying the price

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Not fade away

Who'd have known the way a song ends can symbolise our relationship to life and death? **Steve Sutherland** certainly didn't until he researched this piece

When I was growing up there were three records my dear old mum couldn't stand. The first was *Terry* by Twinkle, a rip off of The Shangri-La's' *Leader Of The Pack* about a teenage girl's boyfriend dying in a motorbike crash. My mum said it was in bad taste. The second was The Who's *My Generation,* which she loathed because she said Roger Daltrey's stuttering was cruel to people with speech impediments. We didn't know about the effect of pills and speed and suchlike on mods, which Mr Daltrey was acting out. The third was The Rolling Stones' *The Last Time* because they were too lazy to end the song properly.

I mention this because apparently the fade-out is… uh… fading out. According to those who monitor this type of thing, a treasured part of our musical vocabulary is about to go the way of the dodo. The fade-out came about in a big way in the Fifties when producers became equipped with the technology to mess with volume. Prior to this, recordings were pretty much just taped live sessions where songs had been developed on stage to end so as to garner applause. Once the studio became a creative space, the game changed. A good example is The Beatles whose early recordings by-and-large boasted traditional endings, but when they gave up on touring they began to expand their horizons so you get exaggerated fade-outs like *Hey Jude*, *Strawberry Fields Forever* and *A Day In The Life* (technically a fade-in as they actually increased the volume to get that last piano note to linger). By the time of *Helter Skelter,* they were teasing us with the false fade-out where the music threatens to disappear only to come galloping back in again to create the crescendo.

There's something contemplative about the fade-out that I will really miss

There are even examples of musical folks enjoying the artistic value of the fade-out in earlier times when sound was cut straight into wax discs or cylinders. In these cases, someone was tasked with slowly carrying the phonogram away from the sound's source. A bit of research reveals that an 1894 Berliner Gramophone record, *Spirit of '76*, was created in this fashion and a fife and drum band are heard to seemingly approach and then march away.

To achieve a really satisfying fade-out, the volume must decrease a little quicker at first and then graduate into a longer fade to silence, a process that sounds natural with its own beginning, middle and end. Within these parameters artists have learned to mess with our expectations. The Smiths, for example, employ the fade-out at the start of *Some Girls Are Bigger Than Others*, turning the whole thing on its head.

The Beatles became the masters of the fade-out when they stopped playing live

Picture credit: Capitol Records

So why is it on its last legs? When Apple introduced the iPod listeners started getting into the habit of skipping to the next tune rather than dwelling on the final seconds of the fade-out. Club culture has also had a say it in its demise. DJs mixing in new tracks, sometimes mid-song, to keep a continuous vibe going seldom get to the end of anything. It's been said that nowadays music is all about the build-up, and once it hits a peak, it's time to move on. You could say we live a TikTok life of thrilling scraps, too impatient for the next hit to hang about.

To infinity… and beyond

There's something contemplative about the fade-out that I for one will miss. I read somewhere that with a fade-out, music manages to delay closure indefinitely: the stop gesture replaced by a gesture toward the infinite. Hmmm. Kind of… For me, the fade-out is all about the what-might-have-been. The jam that seems to be reaching higher and higher, only to be dissolved due to forces commercial or pragmatic… the sentence curtailed halfway through… the possibilities unknown but imagined.

I remember sometime back in the Eighties Neil Young was playing Hammersmith Odeon and we heard him before we saw him. He ambled onstage from the wings stage left and was already partway through a song. Then, at the end, he exited stage right partway through another and we heard him disappear backstage, a troubadour already on his way to his next gig as if to say the road goes on forever. I liked the romance of that. C'mon, let's not let the fade-out fade away ●

STEVE SUTHERLAND
Fade to black

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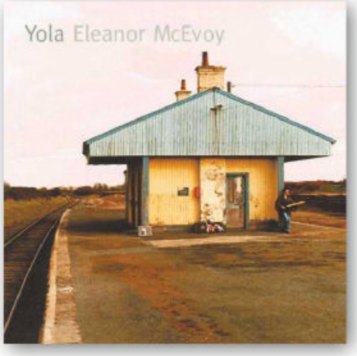
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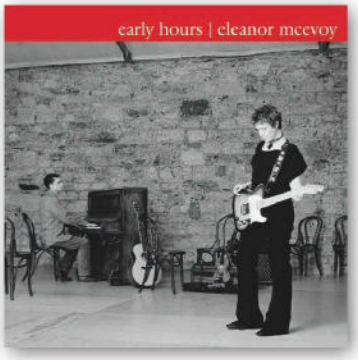
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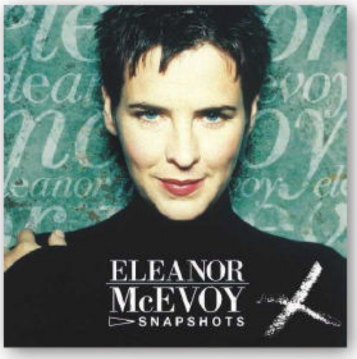
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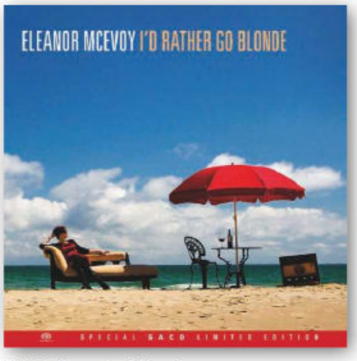
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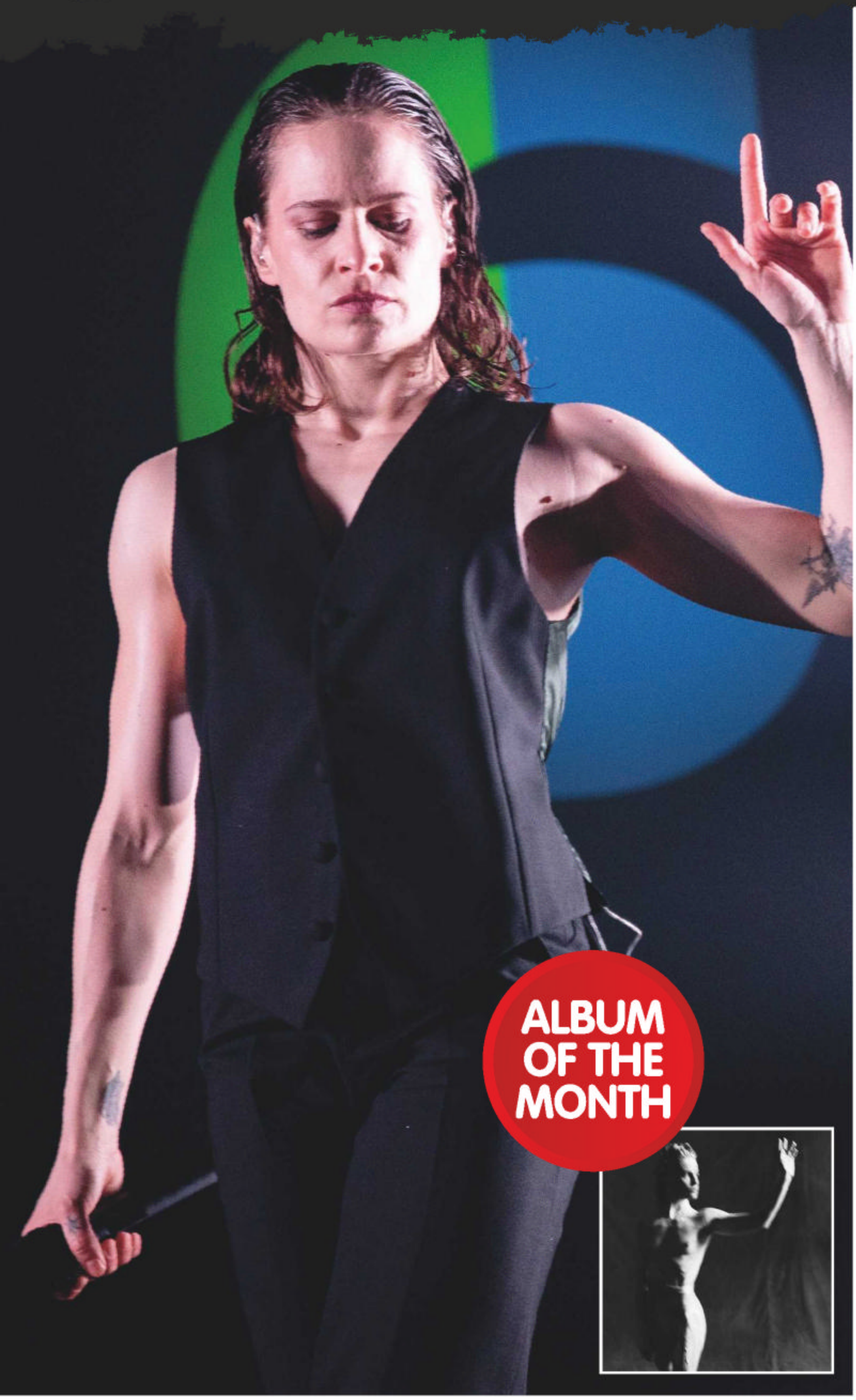

Christine And The Queens

Paranoïa, Angels, True Love

★★★★★ *CD* **Because**

HÉLOÏSE LETISSIER'S 2014 debut *Chaleuer Humain* was released under the name Christine And The Queens. Four years later, the name had been shortened to Chris for an eponymous follow up and then for last year's *Redcar Les Adorables Étoiles*, Letissier re-emerged as a man.

"Just let me flow" he said recently. "Can't I use several names, without calling it a "rebrand"? Every name unlocks a truth". But as he also complained that talking about gender and name changes stops people from paying attention to the music, enough of that. *Paranoïa, Angels, True Love* is Letissier's most expansive and ambitious project to date under any name and confirms them as the most original and exciting act to come out of France since Daft Punk.

There's a lot to digest here in every sense. It turns out that *Redcar*...was intended as a 'prelude' to this 95-minute grandiose rock opera, loosely based on Tony Kushner's 1991 play *Angels In America*, in which heavenly spirits visit gay men sick with AIDs, but also taking in personal themes including a devastating break up and the loss of his mother.

Yet you don't have to buy into the operatic conception to appreciate the vivid, visceral thrill of the music. Long gone is the Eighties boogie flavour of earlier hits and in its place comes string-laden, synth-heavy art-rock, littered with eclectic samples from Marvin Gaye, Emerson, Lake & Palmer's *Lucky Man* and Pachelbel's *Canon* and in which you might also detect such sonic references as Portishead, Kate Bush and Prince.

Above it all floats that falsetto voice, which at times conjures Sinead O'Connor's haunted pain on *Nothing Compares 2 U* and at others reaches for the outer shores of otherness once inhabited by Nico. Madonna – a longtime Christine And The Queens fan – is also heard on several tracks, not singing but reciting lines written for her by Letissier as an angelic 'being of light'. It could so easily have been a sprawling mess, but co-producer Mike Dean – whose credits include Kanye West, Beyoncé and Lana del Rey – lends a steadying hand to create a surprising coherence throughout.

It's epic, brilliant and utterly compelling and like William Blake – who also combined visionary poetry, religious ecstasy and communing with angels – sits gloriously on the tipping point between madness and genius. ***NW***

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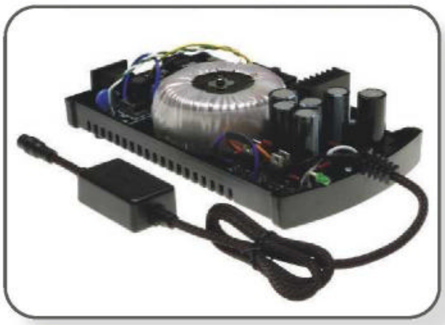

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FATOUMATA DIAWARA
LONDON KO

Fatoumata Diawara

London Ko

★★★★☆

CD **Wagram**

HAVING LIVED HER life between Europe and her native Mali, Diawara's music has long been blessed with a similar duality. There have been albums steeped in traditional Malian roots and albums that have ventured boldly into an expansive kind of avant-garde Afro-futurism, taking in elements of jazz, electro and even hip hop. With the help of Damon Albarn, who co-produced and performs on six tracks, *London Ko* sits somewhere between tradition and modernity, deftly combining the two in a style that is hard to categorise. The title of one track, *Dambe*, loosely translates as 'the value of tradition' and Diawara never loses sight of it. Yet on songs such as *Nsera* and *Mogokan* her grainy voice and driving melodies take African music places it has seldom been before while elsewhere well-chosen collaborators such as neo-soul singer Angie Stone and Cuban jazz pianist Roberto Fonesca add further air miles to her never-ending global odyssey. ***NW***

Her grainy voice and driving melodies take African music places it has seldom been before

Raven Artson

Transformia

★★★★☆

CD **Rosed Out Records**

ARTSON'S DEBUT HAS a cosmopolitan feel, but it's not just the music that feels as though it's floating in space – Artson himself delights in otherworldly personas, and his David Bowie-approach to presenting and inhabiting different characters also gives his art-pop a transcendent atmosphere. He describes his music style as: "tear dripping autotune" and that's a good description – there are plenty of Frank Oceanesque pure-pop moments, but there are also glitchy textures and dreamy interludes. In all, *Transformia* is a good debut and one that ushers in a new talent that's worth keeping a close eye on. ***PH***

JOHN DOWLAND
COMPLETE LACHRIMAE

John Dowland

Lachrimae
Musicall Humors

★★★★☆

CD **Alpha Classics**

MELANCHOLY IN TUDOR times was not seen as an affliction, but a source of inspiration – associated with refinement and intellect. Published in 1604, Dowland's *Lachrimae* (*Tears*) is among the saddest music ever composed. It's in seven movements, each in the same minor key and lasting around five minutes. Played here by a consort of viols, the result is a dark mournful sound that's both soothing and relaxing. To lift the gloom, short light pieces by Dowland are interspersed between each *Lachrimae*. Alpha's sonorous pungent recording faithfully captures the luminous timbres of bass, tenor and treble viols, plus an eight-course lute. ***JH***

HOT PICK
BEETHOVEN
Piano Concertos 3&4
Elisabeth Leonskaja
Orchestre national du Capitole de Toulouse
Tugan Sokhiev

Beethoven

Piano Concertos 3 & 4; Elisabeth Leonskaja Orchestre National Du Capitole De Toulouse; Tugan Sokhiev

★★★★★

CD **Warner Classics**

WHILE ELISABETH LEONSKAJA has recorded extensively over the past 30 or 40 years, Beethoven is not a composer to feature prominently in her discography. These recordings present a composed and poetic view of both works. The music is beautifully shaped – by turns lyrical and trenchant – with soloist and conductor in perfect accord. Leonskaja's piano is very clearly balanced, allowing you to hear the solo part with great clarity. Her finger work is impressively clean and unobtrusively dextrous. Warner's recordings are crisp, focused and clear; a natural truthful sound without obvious microphone spotlighting that reproduces smoothly and easily. ***JH***

Made in 2017/2018, these recordings, present a composed and poetic view of both works

AUDIOFILE VINYL

★★★★☆

Kenny Wheeler

Gnu High

180g vinyl **ECM**

KENNY WHEELER'S DEBUT for ECM is one of the label's series of vinyl re-releases created to celebrate albums that have: "changed perceptions of creative music making". *Gnu High* was originally released in 1975 with the trumpet and flugelhorn player sticking with the larger instrument alongside Keith Jarrett, Dave Holland and Jack DeJohnette. Musicians who have all made significant contributions to ECM's reputation in the modern jazz world. The album serves as a classic example of label founder Manfred Eicher's ability to combine musicians in such a way that they create musical alchemy. It was and remains a highly successful formula, an aid to the evolution of jazz in many respects.

Gnu High proved to be Wheeler's making, putting him on the map he inhabited for the rest of his life and it's not hard to hear why. *Heyoke* takes up all of the first side's 22 minutes and gives both lead players the opportunity to express their feelings in unfettered fashion, it's not the easiest of listens, but certainly means business. *Smatter* has a distinct form and shows that the ensemble can go almost straight ahead considerable style while the title track reaches further into uncharted territory but lands on solid ground. ***JK***

Protomartyr

Formal Growth In The Desert

★★★★★

CD **Domino**

DETROIT FOUR-PIECE PROTOMARTYR have revealed themselves to be one of the more interesting post-punk bands out there. They continue the good work on their sixth long-player, *Formal Growth In The Desert*. Across 12 tracks they ably demonstrate their craft – the band makes driving, abrasive and sometimes difficult-to-penetrate rock. But underneath iconoclast frontman Joe Casey's half-snarl, half-mumble there's real feeling and humanity at the heart of each song, which, in characteristic fashion, builds and builds until maximum intensity is reached. Lyrically opaque but always compelling and musically more spacious on this album, Protomartyr aren't for everyone. But get under the skin of these songs and they will provide a uniquely rewarding experience. ***PH***

London Philharmonic Orchestra
JUROWSKI CONDUCTS STRAVINSKY VOL. 2
TCHAIKOVSKY (ARR. STRAVINSKY)
THE SLEEPING BEAUTY (EXCERPTS)
STRAVINSKY
THE FAIRY'S KISS
VLADIMIR JUROWSKI conductor
LONDON PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

***Le Baiser De La Fee* (*The Fairy's Kiss*) is based on music originally composed by Tchaikovsky**

Stravinsky

Le Baiser De La Fee; London Philharmonic Orchestra; Vladimir Jurowski

★★★★☆

CD **LPO**

1928 WAS A crisis-point in Stravinsky's life. With old-certainties being challenged and overthrown, the world seemed a strange and uncomfortable place. Hence the appeal of writing a ballet that gazed fondly back to a fabled past – the time of pre-revolutionary Russia. It's a lovely score and Jurowski and the LPO relish all its piquant harmonies. Stravinsky absorbed the idiom totally, later remarking he could hardly tell his own music from that of 'Uncle Petya's'. The filler is Stravinsky's re-orchestration of Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty* and the recordings are crisp and detailed, with superb focus and impressive clarity. ***JH***

HOT PICK

SILBERLAND

Silberland

Volume 2 – The Driving Side Of Kosmische Musik 1974-1984

★★★★★

CD **Bureau B**

THE FAR HORIZON is in the sights of all the disparate-yet-deep Krautrock cuts that make up the second instalment of Bureau B's deliciously curated compilation. From the legendary (Faust; Cluster), to the more obscure (Adelbert Von Deyen; Serge Blenner), these 20 white-line fever dreams cover extensive ground over 10 years. Across the board, there's twisted invention here in spades: the edits are illuminating, paring the already propulsive compositions to the bone for maximum acceleration and exhilaration. Plus, bonus points for the greatest track title of all: people, it's time to get your kicks on Moebius & Plank's *Feedback 66*. ***SB***

Meshell Ndegeocello

The Omnichord Real Book

★★★★☆

CD **Blue Note**

MAKING HER BLUE Note debut, Ndegeocello is not rationing the good stuff with an album of sparkling, sparse contemporary jazz. *Gatsby* is a beautiful, billowy ballad featuring the distinctive backing vocals of Joan As Policewoman and a gentle piano echoing Stevie's *All In Love Is Fair*. The wafting, spare ballad direction continues with *Perceptions* – all other-worldly keyboard swirls and dreamy vocals. The tempo picks up on *Towers*, a simple late-night soul smooch with a strong Sade tang and the funky instrumental *Omnipussa* designed to agitate body parts. It's a varied and thrilling selection showcasing her talents. ***PSH***

COOL COLLECTION

Pop's most famous egghead theorist, collaborator with U2 and Davids Byrne and Bowie, former member of Roxy Music and "inventor" of ambient music, Brian Peter George St John Le Baptiste De La Salle Eno reveals three of his favourite most influential LPs

Dorothy Love Coates

The Best Of Dorothy Love Coates & The Original Gospel Harmonettes

Speciality (1991)

A fiery-voiced gospel singer from Birmingham, Alabama, Coates passed away in 2002. "Gospel is the music I've listened to more than any other over the last few years," His Eno-ness explains. "I particularly like the way the voice is liberated and Dorothy Love Coates is the most liberated of them all."

Fela Kuti & Afro 70

Afrodisiac

EMI (1973)

Kuti was an infamous Nigerian band leader, saxophonist and political firebrand. *Afrodisiac* is typical of his stunning output, comprising of only four songs, funky workouts that inspired Talking Heads among many others. The opener *Alu Jon Jonki Jon* is Eno's favourite. "I have a great affinity for West African pop," he reveals. "It's the best keep fit music, the best dance music I've ever heard and I can't sit still with this."

Miles Davis

Get Up With It

Columbia (1974)

"At about the time I left Roxy Music there were some new things happening in jazz spearheaded by Miles Davis who was making records that were highly controversial... very diffuse and somewhat incoherent," says Eno. "As a composer... I was, more and more, involved with the concept of music as landscape instead of as tunes or narratives or little stories or classical structures. I wanted to make music like this, that was a description or an evocation of a place."

Picture credits: How We Get To Next (Brian Eno) and Trevor Naud (Protomartyr)

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Thomas Adès

Dante
Los Angeles Philharmonic
Gustavo Dudamel

★★★★★

2x CD **Nonesuch**

THOMAS ADES' BALLET on Dante's epic *The Divine Comedy (Commedia)* has garnered rave notices from critics. It must make quite an impact when staged, though hearing the piece without visuals you may sometimes wonder precisely what the music seeks to portray. Part 1 *Inferno* is set in hell and depicts its inhabitants suffering various torments for their sins. Part 2 *Purgatorio* starts with a wailing voice (pure purgatory!), but once the music kicks off we're taken on a long and eventful journey. The finale *Paradisio* starts quietly and grows slowly, reaching a glowing celestial climax complete with heavenly choir. Dudamel draws brilliant playing from his LA forces. Such committed advocacy ensures Adès' music descends to devilish depths and storms heights. The recording is vivid and full-blooded with some deep, powerful floor-shaking bass. ***JH***

> **The recording is vivid and full-blooded with some deep, powerful floor-shaking bass**

Daniil Trifonov

Destination Rachmaninov
The Philadelphia Orchestra
Yannick Nézet-Séguin

★★★★☆

3x CD **Deutsche Grammophon**

TRIFONOV'S SET OF Rachmaninov's music for piano and orchestra offers fast, nervy and exciting accounts of these popular works. However, this new three-disc boxed edition unaccountably offers less than the original three discs. Missing are the Chopin and Corelli *Variations*, Trifonov's own Rachmaniana suite for solo piano, plus the solo fillers originally included with the concertos. CD 3 plays for just 30 minutes. Why? A Blu-ray Audio disc reinstates the missing concerto fillers and offers hi-res stereo sound, plus 5.1 surround and Dolby Atmos mixes, but for some reason excludes the Paganini *Rhapsody*. How strange... ***JH***

Tito Puente And His Latin Ensemble

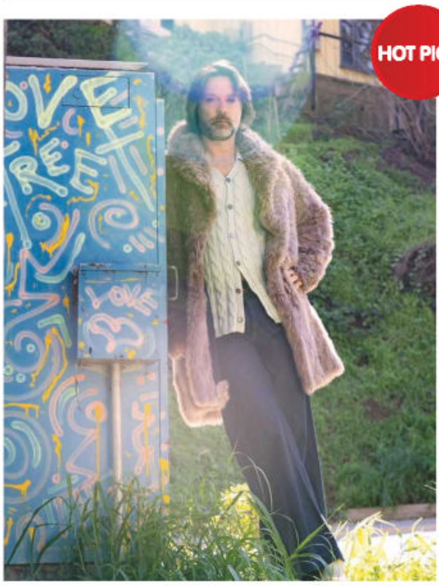
Mambo Diablo

HOT PICK

★★★★★

180g vinyl **Craft Latino**

CELEBRATING THE CENTENNIAL of the legendary Puerto Rican percussionist, band leader, songwriter and producer *par excellence*, this all-analogue re-mastering of the acclaimed 1985 album has been carried out by Kevin Gray at Coherant Audio using the original tapes, and is also available as a 24-bit/192kHz download for the first time. For Puente fans the majesty of the title track and *China* are reason enough to add this glorious cut to your collection, while for newcomers his reworking of classics *Lush Life*, *Lullaby Of Birdland* and *Take Five* serve as a hip-shaking introduction to his unique latin rhythms. Exceptional stuff! ***JDW***



HOT PICK

Rufus Wainwright

Folkocracy

★★★★★

CD **BMG**

WITH A CHILDHOOD spent backstage at folk festivals, a covers album such as this feels inevitable. There's strong support from John Legend, David Byrne and Chaka Khan among many luminaries, and it's all beautifully produced by Mitchell Froom. There's a cracking down-on-the-farm take on Neil Young's *Harvest*, while *Hush Little Baby* is an acoustic confection that unites Rufus with various siblings. Perhaps the highlight is the only original, *Going To A Town*, which includes the other-worldly vocals of Anohni. This is a treat from start to finish, a special collection from a very special artist. ***PSH***

Phi-Sonics

Octava

HOT PICK

★★★★★

CD **Gondwana**

PHI-SONICS MAKE RELAXED and beautiful jazz music of the variety that will help you reach a higher plane of consciousness. Made with woodwind, electric piano and drums and led by bassist Seth Ford-Young, this US quartet knows a thing or two about making a mellow vibe with inner depths. The woodwinds bring beauty and the keyboard delivers sparkle, the ensemble creating a fluid sound that's full of texture and nuance. It's a refreshing change from the attitude found with most young quartets in this arena and one that encourages full immersion listening in its glorious melodies and grooves. ***JK***

Camille Pépin

Les Eaux Célestes
Orchestre Nationale De Lyon
Ben Glassberg

★★★★☆

CD **NoMadMusic**

BORN IN 1990, Pépin is a tone poet, effortlessly adept at creating atmosphere. Her unusual soundscapes hold your attention with music that is deceptively simple yet distinctive and listenable. Despite titles like *Edge Of The Storm* and *Before Dawn Breaks*, her music is not derivative or 'new age'. There's a hint of Ligeti's cosmic mysticism, a dash of Steve Reich's minimalism, topped off by fanciful evocative titles. All the same, her individual voice as a composer remains clear and unmistakable. The performances are idiomatic and definitive – and very well recorded too. Definitely worth a listen. ***JH***

Picture credits: Enda Bowe (Shirley Collins) and Miranda Penn Turin (Rufus Wainwright)

Mendelssohn
Songs Without Words
Volume 2
Peter Donohoe

★★★★☆

CD **Chandos**

THIS WELL-FILLED CD completes Donohoe's recording of Mendelssohn's complete *Songs Without Words* for Chandos. The playing is meticulous and accomplished; serious and mature without being heavy or joyless. It is delightfully performed with great sensitivity, but no hint of cloying sentimentality. Also included is a piano transcription of the *scherzo* from *A Midsummer Nights' Dream*, plus the technically challenging *Variations Serieuses* – which Donohoe plays with impressive ease and fluency. The piano sound is tonally very natural – warm, full-bodied and clear. ***JH***

Ben Folds
What Matters Most

HOT PICK

★★★★★

CD **New West Records**

FOLDS MAINTAINS HIS consistently strong output in what is now over a 30-year career. *But Wait There's More* opens with an intricate music box melody before a barbershop of Folds harmonise as drums and brass bounce in. It sets out the album's stall well as a fun and unpredictable ride. *Clouds With Ellipses* and *Fragile* are as good as anything this maestro of pop melodies has made. There's wry humour and heart-breaking detail combined in the waltz *Kristine From The 7th Grade* showing Folds is not just on top form, he's somehow soared to new heights. ***PSH***

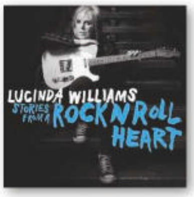
HOT PICK

Shirley Collins
Archangel Hill

★★★★★

CD **Domino**

IN HER 88TH year, folk song laureate Collins selects some traditional ditties and some from her favourite songsmiths to present a lilting paean to her beloved South Downs. There are banjos, fiddles and plucked acoustic guitars as she traverses songs that are often 200-plus years old. The album – and this style of music – sometimes feels at odds with the combination of our 100mph lifestyle and sometimes soulless music. Which is why *Archangel Hill* feels so fresh and important. Yes, it harks back to years – and sometimes centuries – past, but that should not deter you. ***PH***



Lucinda Williams
Stories From A
Rock N Roll Heart

★★★★☆

CD **Highway 20/Thirty Tigers**

"LET'S GET THE band back together," Williams sings on the opening track of this, back-from-the-brink album. The song is a celebration of something that looked like it would never happen three years ago when her home was destroyed by a tornado, the world went into lockdown and she suffered a stroke. Although she still can't play guitar, she got her voice back and the result is a rambunctious set hewn from her trademark Americana mix of roots rock, country, blues and Southern Gothic balladry. Bruce Springsteen is among those singing backing vocals, happy to let her be the boss on this triumphant comeback. ***NW***

Gustav Holst
The Planets
Bavarian Radio
Symphony Orchestra
Matthew Harding

★★★★☆

CD **BR Klassic**

HARDING'S EXPANSIVE DIGNIFIED account of *The Planets* must be the broadest ever recorded. He reveals the work's profound spiritual qualities and makes you appreciate how good Holst is. It's a serious performance that stands in stark contrast to the shallow superficial virtuoso accounts that proliferate. The spacious live recording is atmospheric but detailed, successfully recreating the impression of sitting well back from the orchestra in a large hall. Dynamic range is wide, so it sounds best played at a higher-than-usual volume level. No floor-shaking organ bass pedals, alas. But the bass drum is impressively weighty and powerful. ***JH***

OPEN REEL TAPE

Dialoghi
Elinor Frey &
David Fung

★★★★★

Open reel tape **Yarlung Records**

THE INTRIGUINGLY TITLED *Dialoghi* (*Dialogues*) takes its name from the last track on the tape. The album itself is from the Grammy Award-winning audiophile recording label Yarlung Records, whose aim is to help young musicians and introduce their talent to the classical music world, while also delivering sound that's as close to the live performance as possible by using minimalist audiophile recording techniques. Yarlung Records' engineer Bob Attiyeh produces these albums in concert locations rather than in recording studios. This particular long player, played by cellist Elinor Frey and pianist David Fung, was recorded in the Herbert Zipper Concert Hall of the Colburn School in Los Angeles during 2007.

Elinor Frey is an award-winning Canadian-American cellist, gambist, and researcher. She is the artistic director of Accademia de' Dissonanti (an organisation for performance and research) and has performed throughout the Americas and in Europe. David Fung is an award-winning pianist and was the first to graduate from the Colburn Conservatory.

The first track of the album is Witold Lutosławski's *Grave – Metamorphoses for Cello and Piano*, which was written in 1981. The opening chords on the cello are stern and also very refined. The clarity is astounding and when the piano joins in, the fullness of the recording really fills the room with music, even though there are only two instruments playing. This piece can come across as quite discordant, but Frey and Fung bring tremendous musicality and authority to the performance, which is very captivating.

The famous Bach *Cello Suite No. 1* – BWV 1007 performed by Frey is on the next six tracks. Her version is a delightful canter through the various movements – the *Courante* in particular has an almost cheeky joyfulness, which is really wonderful. Next is *Nana* by De Falla – a moving lullaby for cello and piano. The tape ends with *Dialoghi*, which was written by Steven Stucky in 2006 as a gift to his friend Frey. The music unfolds in seven short, vividly contrasting variations, which are played with elegance and refinement.

The quality and detail of this recording are absolutely superb and the microphone positioning achieves the perfect balance of capturing both the detail of the instruments and the ambience of the Zipper Concert Hall. The album, with a slightly different lineup of tracks, is also available as a 45RPM LP. ***NR***

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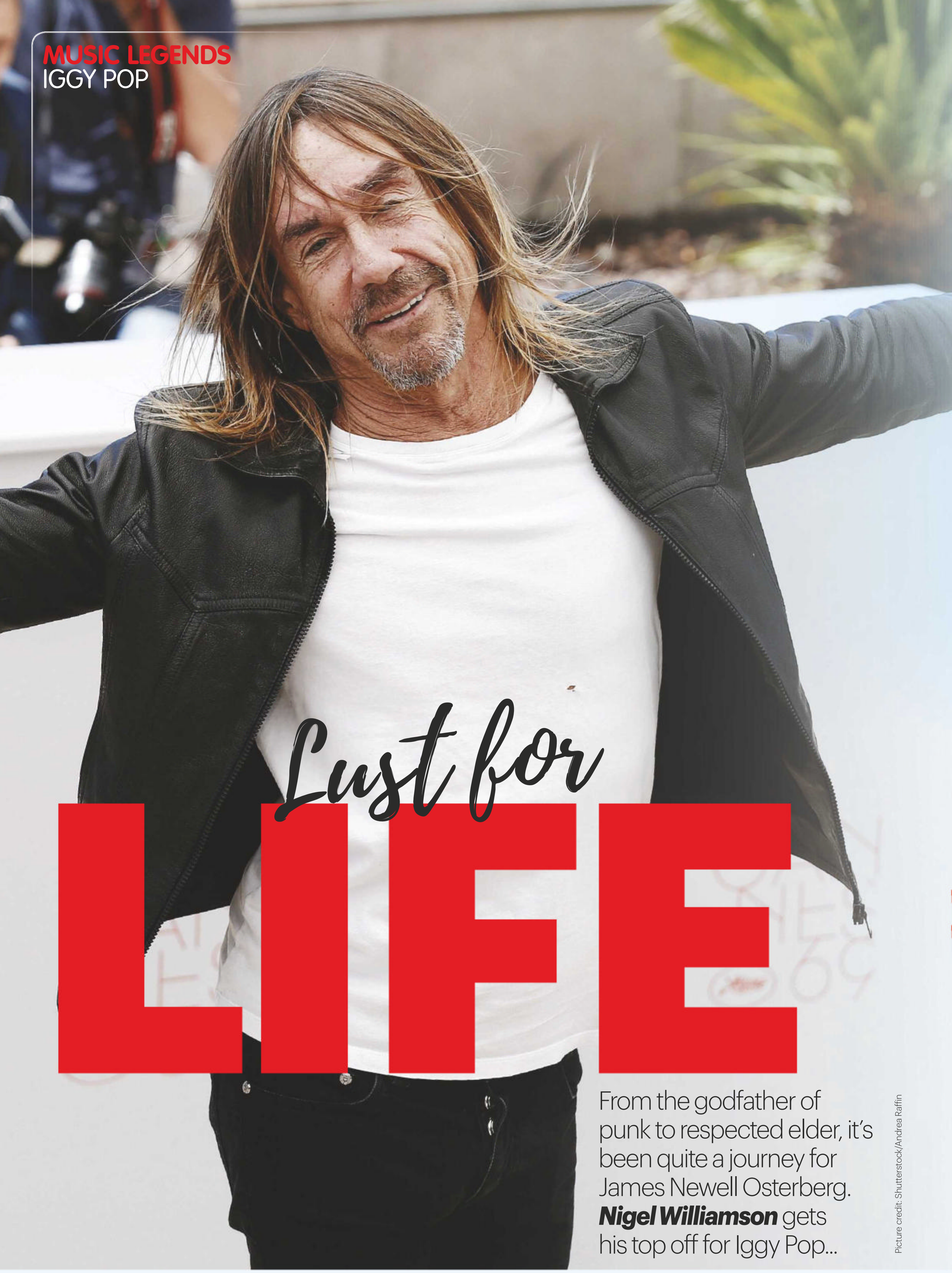
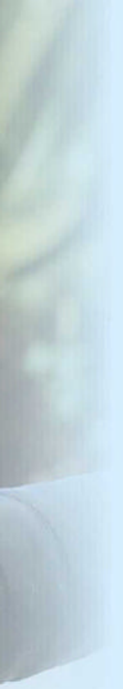


Lust for LIFE

From the godfather of punk to respected elder, it's been quite a journey for James Newell Osterberg. ***Nigel Williamson*** gets his top off for Iggy Pop...

Picture credit: Shutterstock/Andrea Raffin



Of all the wild men of rock legend, Iggy Pop in his delinquent prime was arguably the wildest – a feral and at times self-destructive force of nature, the 'godfather of punk' and the very stuff of which rock and roll myth is made. The titles of his best albums over the years tell their own story. *Raw Power*. *Lust For Life*. *Kill City*. *Metallic KO*. *Beat 'Em Up*. *Skull Ring*.

Eventually, of course, even wild men come back from the abyss and mature into elder statesmen as punk nihilism is exchanged for making serious artistic statements, even if they retain a penchant for getting their shirt off. Listening to the lugubrious poet reciting Dylan Thomas' *Rage Against The Dying Of The Light* over a jazz saxophone accompaniment on 2019's *Free,* it's hard to believe it's the same Iggy Pop who half a century earlier ranted: "I wanna be your dog" on The Stooges' *Funhouse*.

The Iggy Pop story is such a roller-coaster of triumph and disaster, gods and demons, self-destruction and renewal that is probably best, in the words of Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood*, "to begin at the beginning" in the bible-black surroundings of Muskegon, Michigan, in the heart of America's rust belt.

It was here that James Newell Osterberg was born in 1947, the son of a Scandinavian mother and father who was of English descent but had been adopted by a Swedish family and was a baseball coach. He grew up living on a trailer park, a classic breeding ground for "poor white trash" – although at high school he was shy and introverted and: "didn't smoke cigarettes, didn't get high, didn't drink," according to Ron Asheton from the Stooges.

All that began to change when he fell under the spell of Fifties rockers such as Bo Diddley and Chuck Berry and persuaded his parents at the age of 11 to buy him a drum kit. Given the family were living in a trailer, the noise of Iggy bashing the life out of his drums in such a confined space hardly bears thinking about.

He began playing in groups while still in school and in 1963 formed the Iguanas, who became a popular fixture on the Detroit club scene and recorded a self-released single, a version of Bo Diddley's *Mona*. The name by which he was to be known for the rest of his career derived from the group while Pop was not a musical reference, but was borrowed from a junkie friend named Jim Popp.

By 1965 he had enrolled at the University of Michigan and joined the Prime Movers Blues Band. Consumed by dreams of becoming a bluesman he dropped out of college and headed for Chicago. Finding there were no gigs in the blues clubs for a skinny white teenage boy, he was soon back in Michigan under a new name: Iggy Stooge.

Meanwhile, a new musical influence had entered his life and, heavily influenced by the debut album by Jim Morrison and The Doors, he formed the Psychedelic Stooges with brothers Ron and Scott Asheton and gave up the drums to concentrate on his howling/singing.

Under David Bowie's wing, he relaunched his career as a solo artist with 1977's *The Idiot*

The group played for the first time at a Halloween gig in Detroit in 1967 and with the name trimmed to The Stooges, Iggy spent the next two years developing the extraordinary stage act which became his trademark: stripping off his shirt, cutting his upper torso and arms with shards of glass, smearing heaven knows what over his body and –when the audience was big enough – inventing what came to be known as crowd surfing.

Yet despite a promising early bust for indecent exposure, it was not until after the Stooges were signed in 1969 to Elektra Records by famed A&R man Danny Fields – who would also go on to discover the Ramones – that the band began to make waves with their malevolent, twisted, sneering, three-chord garage rock.

Even then, they lapped at the shores of acceptance rather than riding on a tsunami that swept all before them. The two albums they made for Elektra, 1969's *The Stooges* and *Fun House* were poorly received by critics and sales were minimal. By 1970 the label dropped them, regarding them as out of control and convinced that Iggy's growing heroin habit had rendered him unfit for active service.

The passenger

The band split and Iggy retreated to Florida to break his addiction by working on a golf course and shooting a few holes of a different kind. But although The Stooges albums had failed to sell, someone had been listening and the primitive intensity of the recordings had impressed David Bowie, who met Iggy at Max's Kansas City in New York in late 1971 and persuaded him to sign with his management company MainMan and reform The Stooges.

With the addition of James Williamson on guitar, Bowie's management secured Iggy and The Stooges a two-album deal with CBS and the group flew to London in 1972 to record *Raw Power*. The album included such landmark songs as *Search And Destroy* (later used improbably in a Nike television ad) and *Gimme Danger,* but was hamstrung by sonic cock ups. After its initial production by Iggy was rejected, Bowie remixed the album in a single day.

By common consent, the remix was botched, too, and at the time of its release *Raw Power* was savaged by most critics and within months had ended up in the bargain bins.

Yet in the years that followed it acquired a cult following and, like The Stooges first two albums, came to be regarded as one of the building blocks on which the punk insurrection was founded.

Rolling Stone subsequently placed *Raw Power* in its top 100 albums of all time, describing it as: "an out of control classic", Kurt Cobain cited it as his favourite album and in 1997 it was reissued with an entirely new mix by Iggy.

▶

ALBUM BY ALBUM WITH THE STOOGES

1969

THE STOOGES

Grinding punk fury, murkily produced by John Cale with Ron Asheton's guitar sounding like a dentist's drill and Iggy singing like a vampire on proto-punk classics *I Wanna Be Your Dog*, *No Fun* and *1969*.

1970

FUN HOUSE

As raw as it comes, growling, scowling rock and roll that produced one of the greatest reviews of all time which simply read: "This is the album they should give away when you buy your first leather jacket".

1973

RAW POWER

Mean and nasty punk rock before there was punk with James Williamson's searing guitar work complementing Iggy's whelping. Whether you think Iggy's updated Nineties mix is an improvement is very much a matter of choice.

2007

THE WEIRDNESS

Nobody expected the first Stooges album in 34 years to replicate the chaotic glories of the past, but one might have hoped they would come up with something better than this collection of tired clichés.

2013

READY TO DIE

A considerable improvement on *The Weirdness*, in part due to the return of guitarist James Williamson following the death of Ron Asheton in 2009. With Wlliamson co-writing all 10 songs, Iggy sounds genuinely fired up.

SOLO

1977

IGGY POP
The Idiot

THE IDIOT

Under David Bowie's direction, a move away from The Stooges' primitive guitar grind to a narcotic electro-sleaze vibe with *Nightclubbing*, *China Girl* and *Fun Time* among the songs that would become standards.

1977

LUST FOR LIFE

Released just six months after *The Idiot* and again produced by Bowie, a brighter, harder rocking set. There's still plenty of sleaze and menace, but Iggy sounds surprisingly upbeat and even jaunty.

1979

IGGY POP
new values

NEW VALUES

No Bowie this time, but Iggy reunites with former Stooges guitarist James Williamson who concentrates on producing and co-writing, leaving most of the guitar playing to Scott Thurston on a set of smokin' rockers.

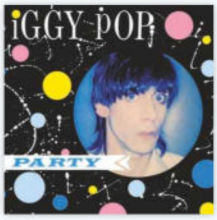
1980

IGGY POP
SOLDIER

SOLDIER

A collaboration with former Sex Pistol Glen Matlock who wrote or co-wrote half the songs. Bowie contributes *Play It Safe* to which Simple Minds add backing vocals, but the results are at best uneven.

1981



PARTY

A low point in Iggy's oeuvre. Ivan Kral from Patti Smith's band co-wrote most of the songs and when they ran out of ideas the album was filled out with a couple of obscure covers.

"Neither Bowie's mix nor my previous mix could do justice to the power of the band," he wrote in the liner notes. "I feel that now I have the expertise at my disposal to give this thing its due sonically".

Back in 1972 when *Raw Power* failed to sell, The Stooges promptly fell apart once more. With Iggy's drug problems escalating again, the management deal with MainMan was terminated and The Stooges played what was to be their last gig for 30 years in Detroit in February 1974. Typically it ended in a battle between the group and a gang of bikers whom Iggy was taunting from the stage. A dodgy cassette recording of the concert was later released as the live album *Metallic KO*.

Iggy checked into a psychiatric institution in Los Angeles and then a drug rehabilitation clinic, coming out on weekends to record at the home of songwriter Jimmy Webb. Yet he failed to kick his habit and he and Bowie were busted for drugs in a hotel room in upstate New York in 1976. Later that same year he followed Bowie to Berlin where he was to live for the next three years. There, as the heroin fog cleared, he entered one of his most creative phases.

Under Bowie's wing, he relaunched his career as a solo artist with 1977's *The Idiot*. Moving away from the punk-metal of The Stooges, the album had more of an electro-sleaze feel and included Iggy classics *Nightclubbing*, *China Girl* and *Fun Time*.

Six months later and again produced by Bowie came the even better *Lust For Life*. One song, *Turn Blue*, was about a drug overdose but for the most part it found a healthy-looking Iggy sounding positive and upbeat, the lowlife drawling replaced by some of his best singing on some of his most vivid songs, such as the title track, which 20 years later still sounded thrilling and vibrant when given a fresh lease of life by its use in *Trainspotting*.

Search and destroy

Iggy was also heard singing on Bowie's *Low* and with the punk revolution in full cry, *Raw Power* was reissued. This time it charted and every punk band in town, including the Sex Pistols, seemed to have at least one Stooges number in their set lists.

The Eighties began with a string of lacklustre albums and after publishing an autobiography *I Need More: The Stooges And Other Stories* in 1982, Iggy took an extended four year break, concentrating on finally cleaning up his drug habit once and for all and getting married for a second time.

Picture credit: Shutterstock/DFP Photographic

1982

Iggy Pop "Zombie Birdhouse"

ZOMBIE BIRDHOUSE

Iggy goes new wave and art-rock – or something like that. Droning synths, global beats and "poetic" stream-of-consciousness lyrics. It doesn't really work, but the ambition is admirable.

1986

IGGY POP
BLAH
BLAH
BLAH

BLAH-BLAH-BLAH

After a four-year hiatus, how best to stage a 'comeback'? Get Bowie back on board, of course, on an album that sounds like an attempt to composite all the best bits of Iggy's storied past.

1988

IGGY POP
INSTINCT

INSTINCT

Teaming up with the Sex Pistols' Steve Jones and avant garde/dub/ambient producer Bill Laswell promised much – but sadly delivered only heavy metal tedium on an album that is a strong contender as Iggy's worst.

1990

BRICK BY BRICK

Iggy storms back with his best record since *Lust For Life*. *Candy*, a duet with the B52s' Kate Pierson, is pure pop but tracks like *Pussy Power*, *Butt Town* and *I Won't Crap Out* are razor tough.

1993

IGGY POP
AMERICAN CAESAR

AMERICAN CAESAR

Another winner. Released at the height of grunge, Iggy was in his element on a raw, sludgy set which included one of the best ever versions of the garage standard *Louis Louie*.

1996

iggy pop
naughty little doggie

NAUGHTY LITTLE DOGGIE

An inconsistent set still under the influence of grunge, the songs are workmanlike rather than inspired, but there are some great moments, including *Look Away*, a tribute to the recently departed Johnny Thunders.

1999

PARENTAL ADVISORY EXPLICIT CONTENT

AVENUE B

On which his-Iggyness gets all introspective as he ruminates on being 50-something, although there's still some hard-rocking with a cover of *Shakin' All Over* and parental advisory lyrics on *No Sh*t* and *Nazi Girlfriend*.

2001

IGGY POP
BEAT EM UP

BEAT 'EM UP

After the somewhat downbeat mood of *Avenue B*, a return to the aggression of yore. The first three tracks in particular – *Mask*, *L.O.S.T.* and *Howl* – are among the fieriest he had recorded since the Stooges.

2003

iggy pop
skull ring

SKULL RING

A back-to-basics album that featured a new band he called the Trolls, plus original Stooges Ron and Scott Asheton back with Iggy for the first time since 1974, and an appearance from Green Day's Billie Joe Armstrong.

2009

PRELIMINAIRES
IGGY POP

PRÉLIMINAIRES

Iggy gets his jazz head on with influences ranging from Louis Armstrong to bossa nova. It was, he said, his response to being: "sick of listening to idiot thugs with guitars banging out crappy music".

He returned to recording in 1986 with another Bowie-produced album, *Blah Blah Blah*. One of the most accessible recordings in his canon, it gave him his first ever top-10 single with *Real Wild Child (Wild One)*, a blistering cover of a Fifties rock and roll song.

As he entered his forties he found himself feted as the godfather of every young hedonist, nihilist and wannabe bad boy in the undergrowth of teenage delinquent rock and roll. Guns N' Roses covered *Raw Power*, Slash played on Iggy's 1990 album *Brick By Brick*, which produced another hit single in *Candy* and he improbably recorded Cole Porter's *Did You Evah* with Debbie Harry for an AIDS benefit album.

He became in demand as an actor, too, appearing in Martin Scorsese's *The Color Of Money*, opposite Tom Waits in Jim Jarmusch's *Coffee And Cigarettes*, with Johnny Depp in John Walters' *Cry-Baby* and on TV in *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, *Tales From The Crypt* and *Miami Vice*.

His transition from punk outlaw to respected all-round entertainer appeared complete when, after appearing at an Elvis Presley tribute in Memphis in 1994, the following year he made his Las Vegas debut at the opening of the Hard Rock Casino.

A series of surprisingly thoughtful and reflective albums followed over the course of the Nineties including *American Caesar*, *Naughty Little Doggie* and 1999's introspective *Avenue B*, in which he ruminated on the pain of being 50-something and alone after his recent divorce, although there's still some hard-rocking with a cover of *Shakin' All Over* and parental advisory lyrics on songs such as *No Sh*t* and *Nazi Girlfriend*.

He'd strip off his shirt, cut his torso with glass and smear heaven knows what all over his body

Yet you can't keep an old punk renegade down and he followed with 2001's *Beat 'Em Up*, a full-on barrage of noise with a new band called The Trolls.

Two years later Ron and Scott Asheton appeared on the album *Skull Ring*, reuniting the three founding members of The Stooges for the first time since 1974, and presaging a full-scale reformation the following year.

The reformed band toured regularly until Ron Asheton's death in 2009 when James Williamson returned as guitarist and Iggy recorded new material with both lineups, including The Stooges' final album, 2013's *Ready To Die*.

Iggy certainly wasn't about to croak, though, and if he was going to go before his time it would surely have happened decades earlier at the height of his wildness. Instead and against the odds he had proved to be one of rock and roll's great survivors.

Over the last decade he has delivered the annual BBC Music John Peel Lecture on the topic of "Free Music In A Capitalist Society", hosted his own weekly show on BBC Radio 6, playing everything from punk to jazz and has been honoured with a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award.

His most recent album, 2023's *Every Loser* was as noisy as anything he had recorded in years, backed by members of Jane's Addiction, Foo Fighters, Guns N' Roses, Pearl Jam and Red Hot Chilli Peppers. "I'm the guy with no shirt who rocks and we made a record the old-fashioned way," he announced. "The players are guys I've known since they were kids and the music will beat the sh*t out of you." As he has been doing exactly that with his music for almost 60 years, it's way too late to stop now ●

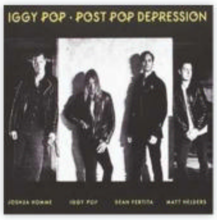
2012

IGGY POP
Après

APRÈS

A set of covers on which Iggy croons Cole Porter, Edith Piaf, Serge Gainsbourg and Sinatra, released on a tiny indie label after being rejected by Virgin/EMI. Iggy admitted they had been "sensible" to do so.

2016



POST POP DEPRESSION

Back to basic garage rock with contributions from members of Queens Of The Stone Age and Arctic Monkeys' drummer Matt Helders. Remarkably it gave Iggy his first Top-20 entry in America and his first UK top-five album.

2019

IGGY POP
FREE

FREE

Arty jams and sculpted soundscapes over which Iggy in lounge lizard mood croons and recites spoken word pieces, including Dylan Thomas' *Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night*.

2023

EVERY LOSER

An old-fashioned noisy rock album, backed by members of Jane's Addiction, Foo Fighters, Guns N' Roses, Pearl Jam and Red Hot Chilli Peppers, all of whom grew up listening to The Stooges.

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As a replacement of the company's first C1AE Ethernet cable, the C100 incorporates upgrades to reduce noise and improve networked audio sound quality. It incorporates asymmetric drain wire earthing, where one end is the earthing point. The idea is that unwanted noise – either external or from connected devices – travels in one direction to the single earth end, which is indicated by a Melco logo. The non-earthed end has a floating shield, which is not attached to the connector plug, to prevent noise being transferred to connected audio devices downstream. Other features include gold-plated connectors, a smooth outer finish to avoid tangling and double shielding. Bandwidth is rated at 600MHz, which is 2.4x the bandwidth of CAT6 cable. The C100 is available in lengths of 1m, 2m, 3m, 5m and 10m.

Perfect timing

I hook up the cable between my network hub and Cambridge Audio Azur 851N streamer, and select a 24-bit/192kHz FLAC of Lyn Stanley's *Pink Cadillac*. The imaging is spot on, which indicates good timing and negligible jitter. Stanley's vocals are positioned right in the centre of the soundstage with the electric guitar close behind her slightly to the left and piano further back to the right.

Listening to a 24-bit/192kHz file of The Locrian Ensemble performing the *Rondo* from Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, the accuracy of the instrument placement within the soundstage is superb. Also, the wide dynamic range of the recording is splendidly transported by the C100. This is a very well made cable and does an excellent job of sending the digital signals to my streamer. ***NR***

DETAILS

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OUR VERDICT
★★★★★

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After connecting the extremely flexible interconnect between the coax output of a PrimaLuna ProLogue Eight Mk2 CD player and the coax S/PDIF input of a Furutech ADL Stratos, which acts as an external DAC, I play a CD of Roger Eno's ethereal *Obsidian* from his album *Mixing Colours*. The music is surprisingly engaging as some harmonic tonal music played on a synthesiser. The effect is similar to hearing a slow movement of JS Bach played on an organ. All the subtle nuances of the piece are beautifully transported to my DAC by The Producer.

Being there

Next to play is a CD of Rimsky Korsakov's *Capriccio Espagnol* played by the National Symphony Orchestra. The exciting opening movement is spacious and open and presents a full and uncluttered sound, even during the crescendos, and I have a sense of 'being there' in front of the orchestra.

A CD of Ane Brun singing *These Days* shows off a great sense of depth, together with excellent deep bass notes that accompany her singing. As the music progresses, I am aware of a real sense of spaciousness, and Brun's diction is beautifully clear and expressive throughout the piece.

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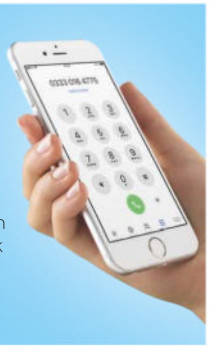

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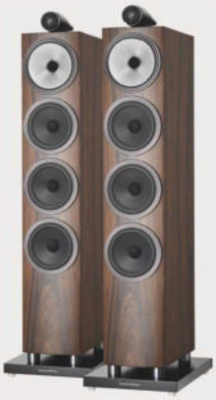

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Price excludes speaker stands

FOCAL • SOPRA NO.1

Compact and powerful, Sopra No.1 is a concentration of technological innovation. Very low distortion gives incredible clarity with the spectacular spatialisation typical of bookshelf loudspeakers

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Price excludes speaker stands

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R3 Meta is a true three-way design. It has a 12th generation Uni-Q® driver array with MAT™ and a powerful 6.5" hybrid aluminium bass driver that pushes performance to new extremes.

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Price excludes speaker stands

MONITOR AUDIO SILVER 100 7G

Imagine a bookshelf speaker that gives you richer sound and deeper bass than your old floorstander. That's what the Monitor Audio Silver 100 is capable of.

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These substantial speakers, with 125mm and 22mm precision drivers, can be shelf-mounted on pre-fitted rubber feet, stand or wall-mounted on optional, dedicated stands and brackets.

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ALPHA iQ • WIRELESS SPEAKERS WITH BluOS

The Alpha iQ speakers are built for the modern music lover – thanks to BluOS, users can instantly connect and stream nearly all the music ever recorded without needing any other components or devices. The options are limitless - play content through wired inputs including analog, MM phono, toslink, and HDMI or wirelessly via Airplay 2, and AptX HD Bluetooth, and more than 20 fully integrated streaming services. The Alpha iQ's audiophile-grade DAC supports resolution to 24-bit/192kHz, with full MQA decoding and rendering capability for high-res streaming.

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The PULSE M comes in Satin Black or White finishes and features to match other Bluesound players.

NEW £449

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The Sonos smart home sound system delivers all the music on earth, in every room, with warm, full-bodied sound that's crystal clear at any volume. Sonos can fill your home with music by combining Hi-Fi sound and rock-solid wireless in a smart system that is easy to set-up, control and expand.

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Buying **Guide**

Selecting the components you want to audition is never easy, but help is at hand with our pick of the best to pass through our respected reviewing process

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Complete HiFi Network Streamer RS250A
Apple Music
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TIDAL
Music
ROSE Radio
CD Ripping
Video

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CD PLAYERS

Audiolab
6000CDT

PRICE: £380 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 447

The 6000CDT is exceptional at revealing what's on your discs to deliver a great big soundstage with plenty of detail inside. It can dig down deep into the mix to eke out the different musical strands while dynamically and rhythmically it's hard to beat at the price. In short, it's a super, highly affordable audiophile CD transport.

★★★★★

Cambridge Audio
AXC35

PRICE: £300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 454

Something of a budget marvel, you'll have to work extra hard to get the AXC35 to put a foot wrong. Bass is firm, detailed and blessed with excellent timing; the tonal palette is pleasingly broad and clean; and though the soundstage doesn't extend much beyond the speakers, there's great depth perspective.

★★★★★

Cyrus
CDi-XR Phantom Black

PRICE: £2,200 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 499

Familiar Cyrus traits such as clean speed, punctuality and a strong sense of transparency are present and correct here, but previous signature leanness has been bolstered by a weightier, warmer balance that sounds more natural and inviting but no less detailed. The result is a formidable melding of old and new.

★★★★½

Musical Fidelity
M6scd

PRICE: £2,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 499

An exemplary player with more than a hint of star quality to it, the M6scd paints a broad and deep soundstage populated with solid, well-focused and perfectly placed images. Regardless of genre of music or production standard, its handling of spatial elements is among the very best in the business.

★★★★½

Primare
CD35

PRICE: £2,700 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 499

The *Group Test* winner that just pips the Saturn MK3 to the post, the neat, clean and minimal CD35 is like the Rega but with more beef and balls. Think of it as a reverse perfect storm – a rare union of positive attributes. The dizzying speed, dynamic tension and perfect mix of delicacy and bite are quite simply jaw dropping.

★★★★★

Rega
Saturn MK3

PRICE: £2,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 499

A supremely talented digital source with appeal well beyond the remit of a Rega system, the Saturn MK3 demonstrates an effortlessly musical performance that sounds gloriously 'undigital' without smoothing off or losing any aspect of musicality. It also has superb connectivity and is an utter joy in use.

★★★★★

ALSO CONSIDER

Audiolab
8300CDQ
£1,100 *HFC* 448
Taking the winning recipe of the 8200CDQ and adding an upgraded DAC with DSD playback, the accurate and uncoloured sound of the Audiolab is unmistakable. Vast amounts of detail are extracted from the mix, soundstaging is incredible and music flows naturally.

★★★★★

Leema Acoustics
Stream IV
£2,300 *HFC* 456
The latest update to this long-established player feels a considerable step forward. CD playback is highly refined, assured and transparent, bass is rock solid with visceral depth that positively grips your solar plexus and streaming shares all these qualities for the best of both worlds.

★★★★½

Marantz
SACD 30n
£2,700 *HFC* 468
While its styling might be a touch divisive, the SACD 30n's involving, detailed and highly refined sound is beyond dispute whether it be with SACD or CD. Meanwhile, its neat supreme streaming integration ensures a great performance without discs too.

★★★★★

Roksan
K3 CD Di
£1,300 *HFC* 403
Offering the relatively rare combination of smooth tonality with a lively and animated way of presenting the music, the K3 CD Di displays a sweet and even tonal balance with a panoramic soundstage. In short, it's closer to good analogue sound than digital.

★★★★★

AMPLIFIERS

Copland
CSA150

PRICE: £4,988 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 479

A tube/transistor hybrid that's more than the sum of its parts, the CSA150 is not just a fine all-rounder as it also excels sonically with a big, strong, engaging performance that's also surprisingly subtle and detailed for such a muscular thing. Well worth an audition, it's a bargain at the price considering all that it does.

★★★★★

Cyrus
Classic AMP

PRICE: £2,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 496

As the name suggests, this is classic Cyrus. The AMP partners four RCA line inputs, an MM phono stage and pre-out with two coaxial and two optical ins with 24-bit/192kHz sampling. The result is top-class refinement and realism to its fast, lively and highly forgiving sound. Ideal if you already have source components.

★★★★★

Exposure
3510

PRICE: From £2,250 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 485

Delivering speaker control like a sergeant major on a power trip, you'd be forgiven for thinking the 3510 has been transported from the Eighties – all minimalist design and line-level inputs. Additional USB/DSD64 DAC and MC or MM phono boards are available and the performance comes across like a sizable blast from the past.

★★★★★

Pro-Ject
MaiA S3

PRICE: £550 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 492

This *Group-Test* winning integrated ran Rega's io pretty close – ultimately coming out on top thanks to the functionality it offers that the io doesn't. Compact and well made, this is a great-sounding amplifier that does a pretty impressive range of things very well indeed. In short, top of the pile for those on a budget.

★★★★★

Rega
Elex MK4

PRICE: £1,200 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 500

Arguably the most complete Rega integrated amplifier yet, the Elex MK4 is a stunning bargain capable of an engaging and highly musical performance. Connectivity is spot on, build is superb and it comfortably gives more expensive rival offerings a serious run for their money. An enormous amount of amp for the price.

★★★★★

Rega
io

PRICE: £380 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 475

It might appear small and rather plain and it might not be over flowing with features or boast a huge amount of Watts, but give the io a talented source and you can't fail to be impressed by its outrageous musicality and lightness of foot. It's at one with the music with a supple fluency and rhythmical literacy.

★★★★★

PRE/POWER AMPLIFIERS

Cambridge Audio
Edge W
£2,500 *HFC* 447
The Edge W power amplifier quotes 2x 100W RMS output and has oodles of power to drive pretty much any speaker. It has a neutral sound with a hint of sweetness and an upbeat nature underwritten by plenty of insight that's seriously good for the money.

★★★★★

Elipson
P1 F/A2700
£2,800/£3,000 *HFC* 494
Elipson's walk on the wild side from speakers to electronics is deeply impressive with this exceptional package far exceeding expectations at the price offering a great combination of power, smoothness, refinement and detail that's highly alluring.

★★★★★

Exposure
XM7/XM9
£1,240/£1,390 *HFC* 429
Fast, open and three dimensional, the XM9 pairing is capable of driving more awkward speaker loads to high levels without any complaint. Partnered with the XM7 preamp/DAC, Exposure's house sound means a fulsome bass, midband detail and a smooth, yet spacious treble.

★★★★★

Rotel
Michi P5/S5
£3,300/£5,400 *HFC* 467
Rotel's high-end sub-brand might not be the last word in attack and slam, and some might bemoan its lack of detail. But that misses the point: when it comes to weight, scale and a breath-takingly natural approach to making music, few combos come even close to this one.

★★★★★

CABLES – INTERCONNECTS

Atlas Cables Element Achromatic

PRICE: £86 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 485

Achromatic means without colour and that's very much what you get with this affordable offering. Compared with previous Atlas Element cables this has increased OCC copper content on the conductors and a new process for reduced distortion. The result is great spaciousness to the soundstage and imaging plus powerful bass.

★★★★★

Black Rhodium Minuet S

PRICE: £240 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 492

Replacing the original Minuet (*HFC* 453), this RCA interconnect is screened to shield against extraneous RFI and EMI interference. The result is improved intimacy in quieter sections of music and great dynamics in the louder passages. The soundstage reveals new breadth and depth coupled with great mids.

★★★★★

Chord Company Clearway

PRICE: £100 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 485

A fantastic performer across a broad range of different music styles, the Clearway features the company's proprietary ARAY conductor geometry and ensures that all the detail of the individual instruments remains well defined, throughout playback – adding to the overall realism of the production.

★★★★★

Ecosse Cables Baton MkII

PRICE: £145 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 493

Turning out a remarkably sophisticated performance at this price point, the Baton MkII utilises Ultra High Purity Oxygen-Free Copper that's plated in Ultra High Purity Oxygen-Free Silver to minimise signal loss. The result is an analogue interconnect that brings detail and clarity to the fore.

★★★★★

Kimber Kable Select USB-Cu

PRICE: From £563 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 456

Terminated with hand-made purpleheart and gaboon ebony connector housings, this distinctive USB cable achieves a soundstage that is both wide and deep. The edginess of violins is deeply impressive while instruments are perfectly located across the room revealing a stunning mix of definition and clarity.

★★★★½

QED Performance Audio 40i

PRICE: £55 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 485

The stand-out winner of our interconnect *Group Test*, this black pearl-sheathed offering pairs a supreme sonic showing with impressive build quality and performances free from muddiness at a very generous price.

★★★★★

"A man who stops advertising to save money is like a man who stops a clock to save time."
- Henry Ford

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CABLES – MAINS POWER

Atlas Cables
Eos dd

PRICE: £145 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 452

Referring to 'dual drain' technology, the Eos dd is designed to act as a filter against incoming contamination. The result is an inky blackness between musical phrases and a supremely low noise floor, while detail and imaging improve as interference is banished.

★★★★★

Black Rhodium
Intro Power Cable

PRICE: £75 for 2m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 502

Available as part of BR's Intro entry-level series, this power cable comes in a choice of seven different-coloured braids to help identify it. It is supplied with a flat pin 13A plug fitted with a 5A fuse and a large ferrite core at the IEC connector end resulting in a clearer and more detailed sound across all frequencies.

★★★★★

Chord Company
Shawline

PRICE: £200 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 438

Available at a variety of lengths, the Shawline mains cable is made from three lots of 14 AWG multi-strand conductors. Test highlights include superior front-to-back imaging, with all the tonal complexities of the instruments really coming to life, delivering genuine energy to orchestral performances.

★★★★★

Furutech
Roxy

PRICE: £233 for 1.5m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 447

Connecting the Roxy to a source component immediately removes a layer of glare and 'glint' from the sound; tonally it's darkly translucent instead of shiny white gloss, allowing the listener to hear more into the music and appreciate the space between the notes.

★★★★★

IsoTek
Evo3 Initium

PRICE: £65 for 1.5m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 413

IsoTek's entry-level power cable has a distinctive opalescent green finish that is flexible and stylish. Once employed, there's a noticeable step up in the quality of musical instrument focus while clarity improves as the background becomes quieter and bass more extended.

★★★★★

Russ Andrews
30th Anniversary YellO

PRICE: £65 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 423

First introduced in the nineties, the YellO benefits from years of research into the effects of mains quality. Employing pure copper conductors, this relaunched cable results in a wider, deeper soundstage and the improvement it brings to instrument focus has to be heard to be believed.

★★★★★

DRAGONFLY COBALT

DAC + PREAMP + HEADPHONE AMP

The award-winning DragonFly Cobalt has the robust 2.1-volt output to drive almost any headphone, uses a bit-perfect digital volume control for outstanding signal-to-noise ratio, enables seamless compatibility with Apple and Android devices, and is an exceptionally competent and affordable MQA Renderer.

Cobalt's precedent-setting performance is made possible by:

- New ESS ES9038Q2M DAC chip with a minimum-phase slow roll-off filter for more natural sound.
- New Microchip PIC32MX274 microprocessor reduces current draw and increases processing speed by 33%.
- Improved power-supply filtering, specifically designed to reduce WiFi, Bluetooth, and cellular noise.
- Includes a form-fitting Carbon-level DragonTail USB-A to USB-C adaptor.

From MP3 to MQA and Hi-Res, DragonFly Cobalt preserves the body, warmth, and natural color in all your music. Experience more beauty at home and everywhere you listen.

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NETWORK AUDIO PLAYERS

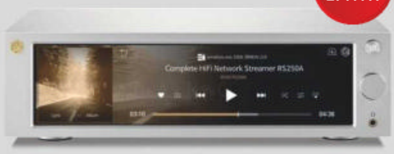
Auralic
Altair G2.1

PRICE: £4,600 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 482

Not just a network-attached DAC/preamp, with the addition of onboard storage the Altair G2.1 morphs into a self-contained music hub that reveals itself to be a deliciously neutral and clean source. It presents high levels of detail without sounding mechanical or artificial and musical involvement is top notch across all genres.

★★★★★

NEW ENTRY



HiFi Rose
RS250A

PRICE: £2,350 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 502

Don't be fooled, the ability to stream both audio and video is no gimmick. In fact the core functionality is so well sorted that this can be judged as a sober and carefully engineered network streamer that's competitive with anything at the price. Throw in the engaging and fluid sound, and you have a winner.

★★★★★

iFi Audio
NEO Stream

PRICE: £1,300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 499

Though it could do with a more comprehensive control app, its sonic capability is absolutely beyond reproach. In fact, the NEO Stream sounds so effortlessly engaging and natural with such a wide spread of different formats and styles that there is no other single-box streamer at the price that comes even close to it.

★★★★★

NAD
M33

PRICE: £4,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 466

Hot on the heels of 2019's M10, the M33 has raised the bar even further. In its full-size guise it offers the same style, flexibility and ease of use combined with a performance that's just as arresting with analogue sources as it is when streaming. Throw in futureproof MDC updating slots, and you're on to a winner.

★★★★★

Naim
ND5 XS 2

PRICE: £2,300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 454

Delivering Naim's distinctive flare and typically impressive sound – superb low-end drive with texture and presence combined with a delicious sweetness – this Roon-compatible network music player is supremely engineered, over flowing with useful features and capable of a sparkling performance.

★★★★½

Wattson Audio
Madison

PRICE: £3,200 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 499

Admittedly, there are less costly rival options available that are just as amply featured as this, but the beautifully designed and built Madison is much closer to an end-game streaming proposition with a stunning on-board DAC that delivers consistently top-drawer sonics regardless of the input.

★★★★★

MUSIC SERVERS

Bluesound
Vault 2i
£1,100 *HFC* 452
If you see yourself buying into the BluOS ecosystem favoured by the Canadian brand and its cohorts, this 2TB, server, ripper and player compatible with up to 24-bit/192kHz PCM and MQA files, is a great way of starting off in one room and expanding as your system grows.

★★★★½

Innuos
Zenith Mk3
From £3,000 *HFC* 451
With one of the best interfaces going and a potentially flexible spec, the 4TB, CD ripping Zenith can be used as a Roon Core and delivers an outstanding performance that inspires confidence even for those starting out. It should be right near the top of any shortlist.

★★★★½

Melco
N100 EX
£2,000 *HFC* 462
Following a software update back in December 2019, the N100 became the EX so it's now powered by the excellent Intelligent Music Library system – the best in the business. The sharp lines of the chassis combined with the crisp, clean sound help seal the deal.

★★★★★

Naim
Uniti Core
£1,900 *HFC* 438
Equipped with a CD ripper and 1TB SSD, the Uniti Core takes on an understated role as it handles 32-bit/384kHz PCM and DSD128 music files impeccably. Presentation is pleasingly neutral and it simply lets whatever network audio player is attached get on with the music.

★★★★★

DACS

Alpha Design Labs
Stratos

PRICE: £1,315 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 455

Remarkably flexible at the price, the Stratos offers an impressively wide-reaching range of features without compromising sound quality. The soundstage is wide and open with a refined presentation, delicate details are reproduced with breath-taking accuracy and instrument separation and location are absolutely spot on.

★★★★★

Audiolab
M-DAC+

PRICE: £800 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 449

While some DACs can dive deeper into a recording, what's so likeable about the M-DAC+ is its poise, control and command of the bigger musical picture. With its stunning grasp of flow and tempo, there's a welcome warmth to its presentation and its solid three dimensional imaging is second to none.

★★★★★

Chord Electronics
TT2

PRICE: £3,400 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 468

We could talk about dynamic range and noise floor modulation, but the TT2 simply creates a more believable illusion of a physical presence and space than its rivals. Combining superb build, typical design flair and stunning sound quality, this is a DAC that not only believes in the superiority of digital, but goes on to prove it too.

★★★★★

iFi Audio
ZEN One Signature

PRICE: £350 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 491

Supporting PCM files up to 384kHz and up to DSD256, this converter combines a decent selection of inputs that should be enough for most users while offering an absolutely exceptional level of performance competitive with anything we've heard under £500. Superb build quality seals the deal.

★★★★★

Matrix Audio
Mini-i Pro 3

PRICE: £900 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 482

Claiming the spoils in *HFC* 482's DAC *Group Test*, the Mini-i Pro 3 offers a winning combination of comprehensive spec and features, a stunning casework and – regardless of which way you elect to employ its services – it sounds absolutely superb. In short, it's the most accomplished digital front end for under a grand.

★★★★★

PS Audio
DirectStream

PRICE: £4,860 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 468

By converting everything it's fed to DSD, the DirectStream reveals more from CDs than its rivals for a superlative analogue-like sound that has more in common with master tape than anything digital can usually muster. Low-level resolution, refinement and a majestic sense of composure add to the positives.

★★★★★

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★★★★★

IsoTek
EVO3 Initium

An entry-level power cable that is flexible and stylish. Once employed, there's a noticeable step up in the quality of instrument focus while clarity improves as the background becomes quieter and bass more extended.

★★★★★

FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS

ATC
SCM40

PRICE: £4,000
REVIEWED: *HFC* 480

One of the company's more compact designs, this 40-litre three-way floorstander is a sealed box cabinet with lower sensitivity than most (necessitating a pretty muscular amp to hear it at its best). However, this is a solid, robust, powerful and gutsy-sounding speaker with plenty of insight and expansive soundstaging. Subtle and delicate enough for softer moments, it's equally comfortable going loud – displaying dramatically rendered crescendos and a fine sense of space.

★★★★★

Bowers & Wilkins
702 Signature

PRICE: £5,000
REVIEWED: *HFC* 480

Sporting B&W's tweeter-on-top, this stunning three-way comes with a glorious Datuk Gloss ebony-coloured veneer. It has a big controlled sound that fills large rooms with ease, ensuring rousing renditions of music overflowing with copious air and space and impressive soundstaging. Deft handling and plenty of punch complete the package.

★★★★½

DALI
Spektor 6

PRICE: £500
REVIEWED: *HFC* 473

This *Group Test* winner positions itself at an extremely competitive price point and while it looks like a £500 loudspeaker, it sounds like it costs way more. It has a lovely natural tone, plus lots of detail and great dynamics. It sounds big, confident and expansive and yet is never overbearing or in anyway in your face. Throw into the mix a devastating combination of finesse and musicality and it's insatiable appetite for rhythm, and it's a no-brainer at the price.

★★★★★

Kerr Acoustic
K320 mk.3

PRICE: £7,500
REVIEWED: *HFC* 480

This *Group Test* winning floorstander comprehensively trounced everything else in almost every way in its roundup. It boasts a tonality that's a touch on the warm side of dry alongside a soundstage of architectural precision. In other respects it has extended yet propulsive bass, a joyously open midband and a deliciously lustrous treble. Plus it makes music great fun.

★★★★★

Spendor
D7.2

PRICE: £4,500
REVIEWED: *HFC* 456

A crisp, open and even-sounding loudspeaker that's impressively engaging and surprisingly dynamic – especially for a floorstander at this price. There's more space around vocals and a lighter more spry sound to cymbals, making for a lifelike sound despite its ability to remain smooth and sophisticated. The D7.2 is a modestly sized, highly capable, do-it-all loudspeaker that's well worth an audition.

★★★★★

Wharfedale
Diamond 12.3

PRICE: £500
REVIEWED: *HFC* 491

This *Group Test*-winning floorstander has skills that mark it out as something special. And first of these is the midrange, which is wide and airy. This is accompanied by some next-level transparency, spooky insight and extraordinary tonal temperance. Completing the picture are the supremely supple bass and glorious build quality.

★★★★★

LOUDSPEAKER CABLES

Chord Company
Epic XL
£600 1.5m, terminated *HFC* 450
Combining elements of Chord's Signature Reference/XL with its Epic speaker cable, the XL bristles with energy and brings fantastic detail to the fore. Subtle elements are captivatingly clear, soundstage depth is enormous and clarity is supremely enhanced.

★★★★★

Chord Company
Odyssey X
£150 1m, terminated *HFC* 451
Made from the same materials as the Rumour X (*HFC* 447), the Odyssey X is designed to bring more control to dynamics and definition, and boy does it deliver. Front-to-back imaging is superb, instruments are well focused and clearly positioned while piano is full and rich.

★★★★★

QED
XT25
£85 3m *HFC* 434
Claimed to achieve a lowering of impedance compared with a traditional large cross-sectional area twin-core cable, the XT25 offers up great refinement and engaging musicality. Vocals are clear and full bodied, silence between phrases is eerily quiet and the noise floor is very low.

★★★★★

True Colours Industries
Storm
£22 1m *HFC* 453
This flexible ribbon cable is 2mm thick, making it ideal for hiding away under the carpet for tidy bi-wire hook-ups, while its tight and well-controlled performance reveals impressive openness with a spacious sound that's full and entirely uncluttered, even during crescendos.

★★★★★

STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKERS

Bowers & Wilkins
607 S2 Anniversary

PRICE: £450 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 470

More than just a range refresh, this baby box has had new life breathed into it in a rather skilful and expert way. So much more than the sum of its parts, the 607 S2 Anniversary Edition is highly engaging across all types of music, has a super classy treble and is the best B&W entry-level standmount yet.

★★★★★

Fyne Audio
F1-8

PRICE: £6,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 473

If the F1-8 is anything to go by, size really does matter. If you're short of space, look elsewhere as this is a beast that won't melt into the background. But as a speaker that merges the strengths of the best standmounts and floorstanders, it is dynamic, dextrous and deeply satisfying with all types of music.

★★★★★

Mission
770

PRICE: £3,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 501

As the runner-up in our standmount *Group Test*, the 770 is actually so good that in several respects it betters the winner (Neat's Majistra) – including its impressive ability to shift vast amounts of air around a large room. It has a slightly retro character that ensures its mix of old and new is very difficult to beat.

★★★★★

Neat
Majistra

PRICE: £3,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 501

This *Group Test*-winning speaker pretty much ticks every box and stands out from the pack thanks to its designer's decision of daring to be different and going with isobaric cabinet loading. It has superb clarity, musicality and tonal smoothness allied to great dynamics and other-worldly bass.

★★★★★

Q Acoustics
Concept 30

PRICE: £900 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 486

The Concept 30 is magnificently free of issues, places no great demand on partnering equipment and is unfussy about positioning. Combined with great looks, it is one of the very best standmounts available at the £1,000 pricepoint. Regardless of what you play on it, it's very hard to unsettle. Superb.

★★★★★

Spendor
Classic 3/1

PRICE: £2,730 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 476

The Spendor Classic may not be as modern looking as some rivals at the price, but don't be fooled: that traditional design hides a superbly talented standmount able to produce a sensational blend of accuracy, scale, refinement and sheer unadulterated fun, and it's not too fussy about placement.

★★★★★

LOUDSPEAKER SUPPORTS

Atacama Audio
Apollo Cyclone 6
£100 *HFC* 455

Available in a choice of three sizes so you can get the height of your cabinets correctly positioned to suit your listening position, this stand removes unwanted vibrations from the performance sharpening imaging and instrument focus for a full, refined sound.

★★★★★

Hi-Fi Racks
X50
From £180.48 *HFC* 453

Solidly built, these elegant yet classy speaker stands are available in a choice of flexible customisation options, removing all colouration from the performance and giving the impression the cabinet is floating in mid-air. Great value for money and a simple upgrade.

★★★★★

IsoAcoustics
GAIA II
£300 *HFC* 427

Attaching the GAIA II feet to the underside of your speaker provides a high degree of isolation that gives it the opportunity to breath and display a level of clarity and openness that's easy to hear. Music just sounds right with them in place and the price is right too.

★★★★★

Townshend Audio
Seismic Isolation Podium
From £1,400 *HFC* 426

Placing your loudspeaker on to a Seismic Isolation Podium is a revelation. The way it completely removes its interaction with its surroundings is mind blowing, bringing clarity to the entire frequency range, enabling it to communicate far more effectively.

★★★★★

WIRELESS LOUDSPEAKERS

Bowers & Wilkins
Formation Duo

PRICE: £4,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 488

It might offer relatively poor connectivity without the Formation Audio hub (an extra £650), but otherwise this is one of the best wireless speakers around thanks to its stunning design and class-leading sound which reveals impressive levels of power and poise under pressure regardless of source.

★★★★★

Cabasse
Pearl Akoya

PRICE: £2,950 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 488

Bringing a retro futuristic touch of glamour to the wireless world, the Pearl Akoya is sold as a single speaker only – so doesn't come cheap. HDMI aside, it ticks most boxes connectivity-wise and its crisp, expansive sound ensures it will prove more than capable for audiophiles. Superlative space-age stereo at its best.

★★★★★

KEF
LS50 Wireless II

PRICE: £2,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 502

Combining an extensive and highly practical specification that makes it an ideal one-stop shop with a level of overall performance that is truly outstanding, this *Group Test* runner-up might not be cheap, but it is unquestionably a quite superb all-in-one solution that images better than most rivals and is sonically fabulous.

★★★★½

KEF
LSX

PRICE: £1,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 446

It might not offer the muscle and dynamic reach of the LS50 Wireless, but the LSX is cut from the same sonic cloth. Size, style, flexibility and sound quality all impress, but it's the active ingredient which enables a performance that similarly priced passive systems will find hard to match that wins the day.

★★★★★

Q Acoustics
Q Active 200

PRICE: £1,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 488

With each cabinet boasting a pair of Balanced Mode Radiators – each with its own DSP and amplifier channel – this *Group Test*-winning standmount has a hi-fi like sound that's tonally neutral, smooth and well balanced. Offering a combination of great sonics, stylish design and superb connectivity, it's the one to beat.

★★★★★

NEW ENTRY

System Audio
Legend 5.2 Silverback

PRICE: £2,400 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 502

The Legend 5.2 Silverback's *Group Test*-winning combination of flexibility, tweakability and knockout sonics ensure that it excels where it really counts and delivers a sound-per-pound proposition that simply rewrites the rules in the sector. In short, the Legend 5.2 Silverback is an unalloyed triumph.

★★★★★

ONE-BOX SYSTEMS

Audiolab
Omnia
£1,600 *HFC* 490

Despite some operational foibles, the Omnia offers a level of performance that very little under £2,000 can get anywhere near. It combines excellent functionality and spec with a supreme level of performance across its wide spread of connections.

★★★★★

Cambridge Audio
Evo 150
£2,250 *HFC* 477

In terms of functionality, the Evo 150 offers little over a dedicated streaming amp such as Hegel's H95. As an object of desire, however, it's on a different plane – as lovely to look at as it is to use and to listen to. There will be many takers for it.

★★★★★

NAD
M10
£2,200 *HFC* 451

With its super flexibility, powerful amplifier design, big front panel touchscreen and impressive BluOS platform, this is a supremely stylish offering. Sonically it's a very powerful and refined system while its definition and precision is in ample supply.

★★★★★

Naim
Uniti Star
£3,500 *HFC* 433

Fast, powerful and grippy with oodles of emotion and a pleasingly expressive tonality, the Uniti Star might not have the forensic detail resolution of some similarly priced rivals, but it isn't far off. Otherwise it's practically impossible to find fault at the price.

★★★★★

TURNTABLES

AVID
Volvere SP

PRICE: From £5,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 472

With its dynamic, detailed and confident presentation, the Volvere SP delivers all of the thrills hidden in your vinyl's grooves and adds a few more just for good measure. Rock solid, unerringly precise and gloriously natural, it's a triumph that combines the joys of a belt drive with the accuracy of a direct drive.

★★★★★

Linn
Majik LP12/Krane

PRICE: £3,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 477

For such an old design, this *Group Test* winner sounds surprisingly modern. It's not as soft and rounded as it used to be, but still retains enough of the traditional Sondek character for it to charm listeners. The result is a big, confident and enjoyable sound that's tonally a little warm but with high levels of technical virtuosity.

★★★★★

Pro-Ject
Debut PRO

PRICE: £700 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 487

Easy to setup and uncomplicated to use, the Debut PRO has been dubbed the most audiophile Debut yet. With its newly designed tonearm, TPE-damped metal feet and 1.6kg platter, it's difficult to disagree. With plenty of room to upgrade, even in stock form, this is among the very best at the sub-£1,000 price.

★★★★★

Rega
Planar 10

PRICE: £4,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 456

A masterpiece that is without doubt one of Rega's finest achievements, the Planar 10 manages to deliver a performance that is outstanding even at this lofty price point. Utterly unflappable, it offers incredible detail retrieval combined with a naturally low noise floor to dish up captivating vinyl execution.

★★★★★

Roksan
Attessa

PRICE: £995 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 493

This all-in-one package includes (an admittedly overly fiddly) tonearm, Dana cartridge and phono preamp (which can be switched off). Sonically, the Attessa is distinguished by its vast soundstage and engaging musicality. Throw in its massive recorded acoustic and supreme midband, and you've got an ideal starter option.

★★★★★

Technics
SL-1500C

PRICE: £900 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 453

The built-in phono stage is terrific, while the take-no-prisoners sonic personality sounds joyously lively, enthusiastic and 'on it'. Thanks to its legendary torque and stability, it locks down timing and rhythm with start-stop precision and its firm, deep and expressive bass adds unrivalled impetus and authority.

★★★★★

CARTRIDGES

Audio-Technica
AT-OC9XEN
£300 *HFC* 452

This *Group Test*-winning moving-coil cart utilises an elliptical nude stylus mated to an assembly using two coils rather than one – which is something of an A-T trademark – and balances excellent performance with a useful boost to user friendliness, thanks to its threaded body.

★★★★★

Goldring
Eroica HX
£550 *HFC* 492

Replacing the H as the only high-output moving-coil in Goldring's range, the Eroica HX can work into a standard moving-magnet input. The result is a cart that though fiddly to fit rewards with a spacious and convincing soundstage with impeccable control and flow.

★★★★★

Hana
Umami Red
£3,400 *HFC* 483

Translating from Japanese as 'brilliant" and 'gorgeous', this *Group Test*-winning low-output moving-coil cart more than lives up to its name. It sounds beautiful with a superb combination of power, poise, musicality, detail and insight, and makes music sound utterly magical.

★★★★★

MoFi
UltraGold
£1,500 *HFC* 485

This good-looking medium-output moving-coil cartridge from the US record label retains the warmth and air we've come to expect of MC offerings, but partners it with the sort of impressive trackability you'll struggle to match at the price. A real smooth operator.

★★★★★

PHONO STAGES

Chord Electronics
Huei

PRICE: £900 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 459

The Huei's appeal extends from its rock-solid build and playful, sphere-based control system to its impressive knack of extracting the best from a turntable/cartridge combo without being too painfully honest about the ropier aspects of less-than-pristine recordings.

★★★★★

Hegel
V10

PRICE: £1,300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 474

It might be fiddly to setup and ensuring you pick the best combination of DIP switches for your cartridge isn't the most of intuitive of processes, but the V10 is effortlessly smooth, gloriously insightful and impeccably voiced for a crystal-clear performance with a wide range of different MM or MC pick-ups.

★★★★★

iFi Audio
ZEN Phono

PRICE: £150 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 495

An astonishing performance and superb flexibility. Until you find yourself at the price where features like adjustable loading and capacitance are possible, the spec for the asking price is outstanding. This is one of a tiny number of designs anywhere near this price that can do justice to pretty much any cartridge under £500.

★★★★★

Musical Fidelity
M6x Vinyl

PRICE: £1,700 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 475

This multi-talented design offers a superb combination of excellent connectivity, versatile loading and gain options, a great user interface and excellent sound. Tonally it's very neutral with a crisp clean and spacious tone that's less euphonic than some may like, but nonetheless fun to listen to.

★★★★★

Pro-Ject
Phono Box RS2

PRICE: £1,300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 481

The RS2's transparency is genuinely impressive, even judged at the price and its lack of colouration is potentially very useful indeed. This is the product you buy when you're already satisfied with the tonal balance of your system and simply need a well-specified phono stage to complete it.

★★★★★

Tom Evans
MicroGroove+ X mkII

PRICE: £1,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 469

The closest thing the UK has to a phono stage guru, Evans designed the circuit for this stunning stage in 1989. Unapologetically plain, light and unassuming, the MicroGroove cuts the sonic mustard like nothing else to make even mid-priced turntables sound far higher end than they actually are. Superb.

★★★★★

IN-EAR HEADPHONES

Audeze
LCDi3
£900 ***HFC* 478**
Clarity, subtlety and coherence meet scale, air and an utterly compelling sense of dynamic freedom on this stunning *Group Test*-winning planar magnetic in-ear. With great poise and even handedness, it never gives the impression of trying too hard.

★★★★★

Audio-Technica
ATH-CKS50TW
£150 ***HFC* 4901**
This chunky *Group Test*-winning wireless noise canceller boasts a 15-hour battery (20 with ANC turned off), aptX, aptX Adaptive and AAC processing as well as Sony's 360 spatial audio format. Excellent value, it provides a supremely spacious and well-balanced performance.

★★★★★

Sennheiser
IE 900
£1,100 ***HFC* 478**
If dynamic dexterity and resolution that would shame a spy satellite are what you crave, the IE 900 scours the noise floor like few other in-ear offerings at the price. Articulation, separation and drive are equally impressive while treble extension and refinement are superb.

★★★★★

Bowers & Wilkins
PI7
£349 ***HFC* 478**
The first pair of True wireless in-ears from B&W does a supreme job of capturing fine details and stitching them into a wider whole. Bass extension is deep without being at the expense of speed and noise cancelling works without effecting the tonal balance.

★★★★★

HEADPHONES

Audio-Technica
ATH-M50xBT

PRICE: £180 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 450

Taking its M50x and turning it into a very capable wireless design (thanks to Bluetooth v5.0) without altering its sonic character, Audio-Technica has come up trumps here. Balance and refinement join crunching bass, impressive three dimensionality and decent noise-cancelling to seal the deal.

★★★★★

Bowers & Wilkins
Px8

PRICE: £600 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 500

B&W doesn't put a foot wrong with this *Group Test*-winning over-ear. Featuring a tantalising combination of attractive design and comfort for long-term listening, the sound quality is an absolute delight. Capping the overall performance are impressive connectivity options and supreme noise cancelling.

★★★★★

Focal
Utopia (2022)

PRICE: £4,700 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 496

With its fast, open and transparent sound, the 2022 update is equally adept with high-quality recordings as it is with less pristine material, and the new design is wonderfully comfortable. Though not drastically altered from the original Utopia, this is just about the best all-round headphone on the planet right now at the price.

★★★★★

Philips
Fidelio L3

PRICE: £300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 486

This wireless noise-cancelling headphone *Group Test* winner ticks pretty much every box at the price. Boasting aptX HD, a 38 hour battery and decent noise cancelling, it is well built and comfortable. And while the app makes operation a doddle, the music just flows in an easy going, unforced way.

★★★★★

Sennheiser
Momentum 4
Wireless

PRICE: £300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 495

Its 42mm dynamic drivers may be the same as its predecessor, but the Momentum 4 has updated Bluetooth and battery, ensuring that regardless of wired or wireless use its sound quality, versatility and noise-cancelling are superb.

★★★★★

T+A
Solitaire P-SE

PRICE: £3,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 477

Shaving as much as 40 percent off the price of its flagship P headphone, while retaining more than 60 percent of the capability, this is a stunning open-back, planar magnetic T+A offering. It might be expensive, but the sheer levels of performance and the quality of the build and design mean it is one of the best.

★★★★★

PORTABLE DACS

Chord Electronics
Hugo 2
£1,800 *HFC* 428
An essential audition, the Hugo 2 is not just a portable DAC/headphone amp, but the best hi-fi digital converter available at or near the price. Music ebbs and flows along in an organic and unforced way and it images with stunning pinpoint precision.
★★★★★

Chord Electronics
Mojo 2
£450 *HFC* 488
It might be £50 more than its predecessor, but the follow-up Mojo makes the superb original sound opaque, coloured and closed-in by comparison. Prepare to experience complex textures, limpid transparency, striking stereo and unnoticed details like never before.
★★★★★

iFi Audio
GO bar
£330 *HFC* 494
A near technically perfect example of a portable DAC, the GO bar sets new standards of for the breed with functionality for every occasion. Accurate, with a potent yet engaging sound, it partners great features with exceptional sound.
★★★★★

iFi Audio
xDSD
£400 *HFC* 439
Justifying its inclusion on sound alone, the xDSD delivers a wide variety of musical styles with admirable clarity and precision. It's engaging, lively sonics and versatile connectivity make it equally adept for mobile or desktop use and the only minor downside is its battery life.
★★★★★

Hi-Fi Choice Reader Classified

Welcome to *Hi-Fi Choice* Reader Classified, a free private ads service for buying and selling second-hand hi-fi components.

These pages are a must-read if you're thinking about buying used kit, or if you have hi-fi you want to sell. It's free – simply submit your ad with no more than **50 words** (we reserve the right to edit it if not), remembering to include your email, phone number and county. Simply email your ad to: **letters@hifichoice.co.uk**. This service is open to private advertisers only. Just **one** ad per household and please note that images are for illustration only and **do not** represent what is for sale.

FOR SALE

REGA Elicit Mk5, only six months old in mint condition with all original packaging and accessories, £1,550: **07572 326426 or email: gwattis70@gmail.com (Sutton Coldfield).**

WILSON BENESCH Discovery Mk 1 speakers pair in excellent condition and in perfect working order, complete with jumper leads, grille covers and original boxes. Payment in cash on collection. £2,995.95: **02392 453382 (Portsmouth)**.

QUADRASPIRE hi-fi rack with two beech shelves and silver uprights. Good condition, £35: **07785 724849 (Oxfordshire).**

HI-FI CHOICE magazine July 2001 to May 2022 (plus December 1997, April 1999, October 2000 and February 2001). No reasonable offer refused for complete collection only. Buyer collects. Also other hi-fi mags: **07774 935844 or email: cjw0006@gmx.com (Bradford, West Yorks).**

ICON AUDIO FRM 1 standmounts in rosewood, good condition, original boxes, come with stands, high sensitivity, £500. Collection only: **01353 665059 (cambs area).**

DENAFRIPS Venus II D/A Converter in silver, mint £2,200: **07508 035671 or email: andy.aldridge@gmx.com (Cumbria).**

GOLDEN EAR Triton One.R speakers in mint condition, fully boxed. Collection only. Offers around £3,500: **0771 2593669 or email: petera44@mail.com (Peterborough).**

PIONEER PL12D turntable with original packaging and manual. Thorough examination and service by AN Audio, Sep 2022, £170. Leak Throughline Mk2 FM tuner, £50. Payment in cash on collection: **email: syb7241@gmail.com (Huntingdon).**

VERTERE Pulse-B analogue RCA, 1.65m (RRP £949). Boxed, as new, £400: **07729 182116 (Oldham).**

FALCON ACOUSTICS RAM 10 speakers, burr walnut, as new condition, all original packaging, £800. Collection only: **07398 642586 or email: johnakeanelangley@gmail.com (Langley, Berkshire).**

DENON DBT-3313UD silver, as new, boxed with remote etc, free 3m AudioQuest Pearl HDMI plus Van den Hul The Wave Interconnect £350 ono. Collection from near Maidstone: **01732 490492 (Kent).**

ORBE platter kit to convert a Gyro to an Orbe, brand new/open box, £400: **07891 534695 or email: awhitewsv@googlemail.com**

DS AUDIO HS-001 solid headshell, brand new and never used, postage included anywhere in UK £340: **email james_mcleod789@btinternet.com.**

IFI AUDIO NEO iDSD ultra HD DAC and headphone amp. With iFi switched power supply, original box and like new £360: **07923 047638 or email: dave.drew@talktalk.net (East Yorkshire).**

BBC LSU 10 Parmeko studio monitors, Altec cabinets, pair in very good condition. Offers around £30k: **07768 000052 or email: ghel1500@gmail.com**

NAIM NAC 202 preamplifier (2016). No box but includes cable, remote and manual. In new condition and incudes NAPSC power supply. Prefer buyer to collect, £500: **07484 733628 or email: Jon.mills58@outlook.com (Gloucestershire).**

MONITOR AUDIO Gold 10 speakers, good condition £400. Rega Apollo-R CD player, includes Nordost Solar Wind interconnect, good condition £250. Buyer collects or pays postage: **07845 395396 or email: robertwmurray19@gmail.com (Merseyside).**

AVI Neutron MKIV speakers in black ash, superb condition, big sound for its diminutive size. Original price £550, sell for £300 ono. Call Andy on: **01484 427426 or email: andrewstringer476@yahoo.com**

HARBETH 30.2 and other thin-walled speakers of the same dimensions, totally unmarked, £600 plus postage: **07775 441059**

STD 305 Seventies turntable along with a sprung SME placement. I used a SME M2-9 and

BUYING TIPS BUYING SECOND-HAND can be a great way to pick up a bargain. A formerly expensive second-hand component might well prove a better long-term bet than a brand-new product if the price is right. **DO SOME RESEARCH** on which brands have a good service back up, so if something does go wrong, you can get it fixed. Unless you purchase from a dealer, you're unlikely to get any warranty, so it's up to you to ensure the fitness of any gear that you buy. **USUALLY** speakers should be less prone to breakdown than amps, and amps should be more reliable than CD players. But any abused component could be trouble – have a proper demo and judge the seller as well as the goods!

Ortofon 2m Bronze. Has a spare belt. The lid has been damaged in corner, pictures available. £160 including mainland UK postage: **email: TSmith1916@aol.com (Cornwall).**

QED Reference XLR 40 analogue cables (pair), 0.6m long, boxed, in very good condition. XLR-to-XLR, £40 ono. Collection only: **07814 727957 or email: adamleighpayne@yahoo.co.uk (Powys).**

WILMSLOW AUDIO Rhythm King floorstanding speakers in mahogany. Closed box, external crossovers, in good condition, can demo, £400 ono. Buyer collects: **07796 109490 or email: 22terry@tiscali.co.uk (Staffordshire).**

B&W DM602 speakers, good condition for age, £100 ono. Gale Mk1 speakers, good condition, £30. Marantz CD-63 CD player, VGC, £75: **07900 285364 or email: john.wright300@ntlworld.com (Norwich).**

DALI Epicon 2, only 10 months old, will sell for £3,300. First to see will buy: **email: nnewby49@hotmail.com**

PATHOS Classic One intergrated hybrid amplifier. Handbook and handset. In excellent condition £880: **07771 807042 (Lancs).**

ICON AUDIO FRM 1 standmounts in dark rosewood, stands included, good condition. RRP £1,300, looking for £500. Pick up only: **01353 665059 (Cambs area)**

CASTLE Severn floorstanding loudspeakers, mahogany finish, clean condition, £125 ono: **01562 883218 (West Midlands).**

CHORD ELECTRONICS Qutest DAC. Excellent condition, all leads, box and instructions £750. Naim CD5XS, with remote, power cable, interlink, manual and box . Immaculate exterior, £775: **ruane.hp157@virginmedia.com. (Essex).**

B&W DM602 loudspeakers in good condition for age, £100 ono: **07900 285364 or email: john.wright300@ntlworld.com (Norwich).**

ARCAM quality vintage A65+ amplifier (with original box) and Cd63t CD player. Both black, fully working and in exceptional condition. £80 each. Also DALI Lektor 2 bookshelf speakers, as new in original box, black ash, £110: **07884 952389 or email: jackson114@btinternet.com (Kent).**

MARANTZ CD6006 £200. Onkyo 9010B £95. Both as new black and boxed. Audio-Technica AT-OC9ML/11 50 hours' use £100: **01626 331634 or email: bjmick19@gmail.com (Devon).**

DYNAUDIO Evoke 10 compact standmount speakers in walnut. Purchased new November 2021 and in unmarked condition, boxed as supplied, £650: **01825 722936 (Sussex).**

FOCAL Clear MG professional headphones. As new, boxed with full accessories including unused spare earpads. Purchased from new November 2021 with two year dealer warranty. £750, collection only: **nwpsys@gmail.com (London).**

SME Model 10 turntable in superb condition. Tonearm not included, but I have a compatible Pro-Ject 9CC and OL Zephyr for sale too. One careful owner from new and replacement rubber suspension bands included. £2,750 ono. **07974 515518 or email: manish.solanki.uk@gmail.com (SW London).**

HI-FI RACKS stands. Cost £350. For sale £100. AV stand from John Lewis. £750 new. Would take £125: **07758 602375 (Lancashire).**

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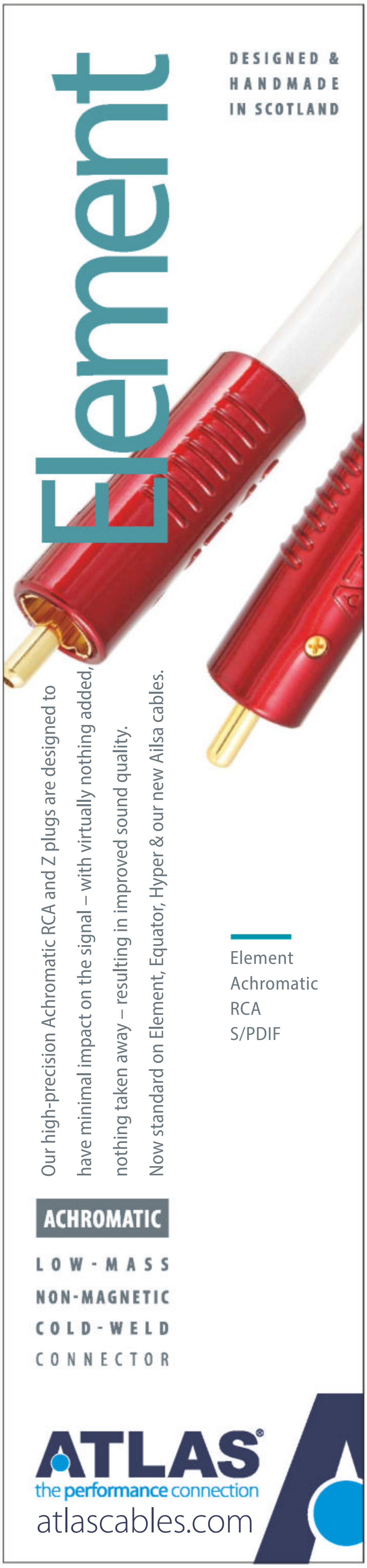

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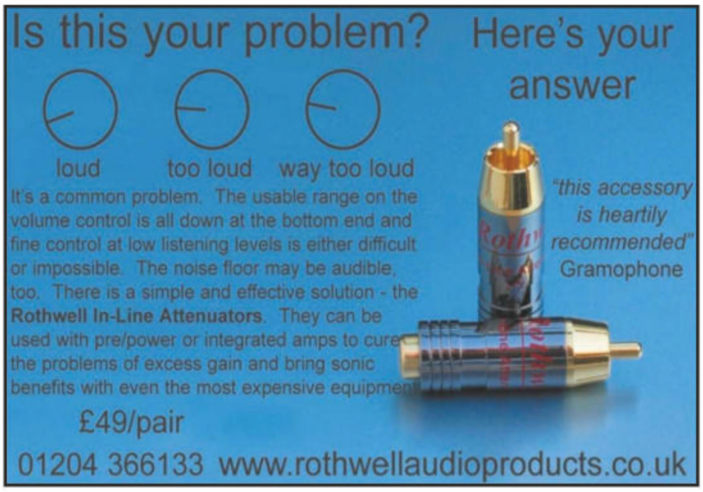

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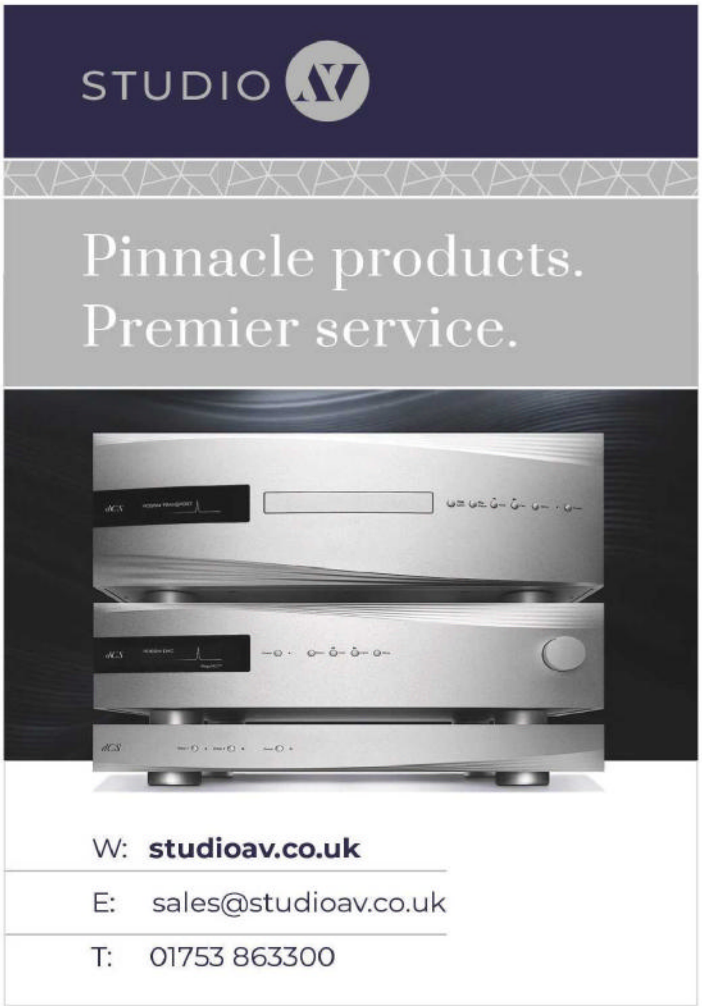

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LEVEL CROSSING RECORDS
ANTIQUES

Mörk
LA MARZOCCO

DESTINATION: MORTLAKE

Your new favourite tracks are right here in the suburbs of Richmond upon Thames. All are welcome here, where the jazz force is strong. By. ***Simon Berkovitch***

We're up before the lark. Somehow. A bleary-eyed *HFC* bobs and weaves against the tide of commuters, emerging out of a suburban station in tranquil Richmond upon Thames. Quarry located. The sound of music hovers into earshot. The time is just gone 7:30am and, stepping past the rope reserved for early-bird vinyl-hunters, we are already a blur of fingers in the 7in singles box on the counter in pursuit of new kicks. Record shopping at this hour? Extraordinary – especially when you consider some record shops' elastic approach to opening hours.

The game is on, but an involuntary yawn kicks in. "Coffee?" beams irrepressible Mark Buckle from behind the counter. Well, it's far from the worst idea in the world and as beans grind and milk froths, we settle in to chat about Mortlake's excellent hot spot for vinyl kicks: Level Crossing Records.

I'm waking up to the idea that I'm talking to a morning person. "For me, a typical day would be arrive at the shop at 7am and get the coffee going," Mark enthuses. "We're open at 7.30am. Regular coffee drinkers would be in and out before work, followed by deliveries between 10 and 11am, and unboxing new arrivals. Lunchtime onwards, the diggers arrive and regulars congregate around the bar. I'll chat about music, make coffees and play records for the rest of the day." He laughs: "I can't complain, to be honest!"

> **"We only stock vinyl in store, but we can order in any format the customer requests"**

We're getting to hear about Level Crossing Records in the relative calm before the storm: our visit coincides with Mark looking forward to a busy Record Store Day, of which Level Crossing Records is an enthusiastic participant. "We are most definitely 'in' on Record Store Day," he says. "There is nothing quite as magical as arriving at the store on the morning of Record Store Day and seeing the queue of all the regular and new customers chatting about what they are looking for. This year we have multiple acts playing throughout the day."

Live performances are part of the Level Crossing Records experience and the shop is designed for it: its record browsers are on wheels and can be shifted to make space.

Level Crossing Records' name speaks for itself: "The shop is directly opposite Mortlake station and next to the level crossing," Mark says, "which, for the amount of time it's down for traffic, is great advertising." The seed for the store was planted about seven years ago, "with two years of looking for the perfect location, planning and learning." Learning? Yes, Mark retrained as a barista.

"Coffee and records was always the plan," he explains. "The main thing was that the

“A typical day would be arrive at the shop at 7am and get the coffee going”

coffee had to be as good as the music we sold, which we believe we have nailed.” There’s certainly no disagreement from us. “I worked two years as a barista to help perfect my craft,” he adds. “We tried coffee from over 50 roasters before deciding on Dark Arts Coffee, roasted in Hackney.”

He continues: “Half of our vinyl selection is chosen from what people in the area dig with the other 50 percent our choice. It makes for a one-off eclectic mix of sounds. We only stock vinyl in store, but we can order in any format the customer requests.”

Open Wednesday to Sunday, Level Crossing Records opened for business in 2018. “In the five years since starting out, regular customers have become extended family. The community that’s developed around the shop is the reason we get up in the morning and the best thing about owning a place like this,” Mark reveals.

Level Crossing is home to a couple of thousand LPs, both new and used. “We have over 2,000 records in store covering the majority of genres and we also order in any special requests for vinyl from our customers,” Mark explains. The second-hand section is small but refreshed regularly: “This is generally sourced within the local community and we split the profits with the customer who brought in the record.”

A mix of newbies and dedicated diggers gravitate to Level Crossing, says Mark. “We have new customers every day and that hasn’t really changed since we opened. Our main thing is – everyone is welcome. There’s no snobbery here. For our regular diggers, the shop is like a home from home. We love them like family and very much hope they feel the same.”

When it comes to getting the word out about Level Crossing Records, social media is the name of the game. “We put a lot of time and effort into producing content for our socials to entertain our customers and keep them up to date with the latest releases.” Spotify too: check out Level Crossing radio.

Mark’s passion for vinyl and analogue sound runs deep. “Alongside an addiction to buying vinyl, I played in bands for many years,” he explains. “As a band we were lucky enough to record at Toe Rag studios with the great Liam Watson [engineer and producer, most famous for his work with the White Stripes], which whet my appetite even more for analogue. I wouldn’t say I am a big record collector as over the years my addiction got stunted with paying for studio time and rehearsals with the band, but I have always kept my eye in. The record shop always allows me to craft my perfect vinyl collection and share it with our customers.”

He adds: “Vinyl has never been away for me – it has and always will be the only way to listen to music. It makes me warm inside that the kids are also realising this.”

HFC’s inevitable query about Level Crossing’s hi-fi setup is met with a knowing look. “I knew this question was coming,” Mark laughs. “In the shop, we have a Pro-Ject Carbon and also some Technics 1210s for our regular DJ sets.” His domestic setup sounds enviable too: “At home, I have a nice old Rega Planar 3 with some Harbeth speakers – a nice, warm sound.”

“There is nothing quite as magical as arriving at the store on RSD and seeing the queue”

Mark clearly has a passion for vintage audio, but don’t tag him as a nostalgia merchant: Level Crossing is very much about the now, with a side order of then. His selection of recommended records is a gloriously wide sweep of current music, covering everything from modern London jazz and jungle-inspired breaks to indie pop.

A queue for coffee is forming, the capital is beckoning and it’s time to cross the tracks, but this first visit won’t be the last. Our final question requires tea leaves, not coffee beans: what does the future hold for the shop? “We have so many future plans, including a regular live music night, a festival and maybe a label,” Mark says. “But let’s keep the lights on for now.”

Level Crossing Records: damn fine cup of coffee; damn fine vinyl emporium. Agent Cooper would surely approve ●

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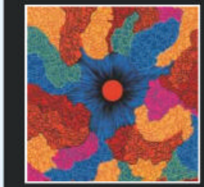
Twitter: @lcrsw14
Email: hello@good-vibes.space

SHOPPING LIST

Level Crossing’s Mark hangs up his barista’s apron to hit the wheels of steel, recommending eight personal bests; an octet of recent favourites from the LCR soundsystem

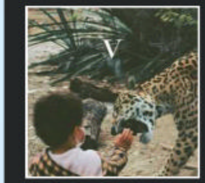
Vieux Farka Touré & Khruangbin
Ali
“My album of the year in 2022. Khruangbin and Vieux Farka Touré playing Ali Farka Touré covers – basically, all of my favourite things on one record!”



Skinshape
Nostalgia
“With Tame Impala meets Ennio Morricone energy, I’ve been a massive fan of William Dorey’s Skinshape for a while. The sound has roots in everything from funk to soul and reggae.”

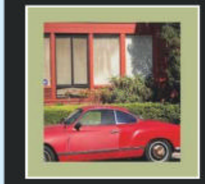
Transmissions from Total Refreshment Centre

Various Artists
Transmissions From Total Refreshment Centre
“An amazing compilation of jazz showing everything that’s great about the London music venue and recording studio founded by Lex Blondel.”



Unknown Mortal Orchestra
V
“Lo-fi West Coast sounds from New Zealand – it’s palm trees and lie-downs all the way on this the fifth studio album by Ruban and Kody Nielson.”

Nia Archives
Sunrise Bang Ur Head Against The Wall
“Jungle breaks with a vinyl crackle. There are some amazing melodies on this record, the second solo EP from the rising Bradford-born producer.”



The Reds, Pinks & Purples
The Town That Cursed Your Name
“The eighth album in four years from San Francisco’s prolific Glenn Donaldson. This is DIY indie-pop greatness. I love the vocals!”

Sylvie
Sylvie
“Some serious Seventies Laurel Canyon vibes courtesy of Southern California’s Ben Schwab, listening to this cut is like travelling back in time. Just beautiful.”

Theon Cross
Intra-I
“Welcome to the Tuba soundsystem of jazz. An amazing and unique record from the 30-year-old Sons of Kemet and SEEDS ensemble brass blower extraordinaire.”

Sleeve credits: ???

"THEY ALL HATE ME..."

It's 1984 and Van Halen are on a world conquering tour. **Steve Sutherland** joins them in Buffalo, New York State only to discover a band in disarray

Edward Lodewijk Van Halen is crying. He's crying, and his hands are scabbed and bleeding. He looks up and the first thing he says is: "I hit walls when I get mad". He looks back down at his battered fists and mutters: "no knuckles."

This situation is a mite concerning considering Eddie is currently the most famous guitarist in the world. I should also mention that he is slurring and appears to be drunk.

"My wife Valerie talked me into using my feet," he confides. "I broke three toes so I went back to my hand… at least until my foot heals. I get… frustrated," he adds, talking to himself. "Not mad really, it's just like… yeaaargh!"

He stares at the floor for a moment and then whispers: "They all hate me."

Who? I ask. Who hates you?

"Them." He motions towards the door. We are in a small, dark cloak room – cinder block walls, benches, coat hooks – backstage at a sports venue in Buffalo, upstate New York where Van Halen have just played a triumphant gig to a baying crowd of appreciative jocks. In the brightly lit dressing room next door, the rest of the band are engaged in a full-on food fight. David Lee Roth and co. riotously at it as if they were auditioning for Spinal Tap. Eddie sobs quietly and explains that the band are miffed because he's just contributed a solo to *Beat It*, the monster hit off Michael Jackson's *Thriller* LP, and it's been such a smash that they think he's about to quit the band, go solo and leave them all in the lurch. Which, he swears, isn't true.

Play time

"The guys get uptight when I do outside things. I don't see any way it could've hurt... But I didn't do it for that reason. I just did it for the goddam fun. I just like to play and it's sickening to have no one to play with."

Eddie explains that when the phone call came from Quincy Jones inviting him to contribute to *Thriller* he didn't even know who Jones was and thought it was a crank call. He was intrigued and, with Lee Roth holidaying in Haiti and uncontactable to check if it was cool, he took the plunge and said yes.

I ask if he got to meet Michael Jackson?

"Yeah, he was there. He was across the hall doing *ET* or whatever. I started playing and he came in and went (adopts Mickey Mouse voice), 'I really like that fast stuff you do'. He's a great guy... Certain people," he says, virtually spitting the words: "think I was a fool to play on an album that sold so many copies and not ask for payment. I didn't want paying. I know I helped him. It wasn't until *Beat It* was released as a single, with all the press about me playing the solo, that they started playing Michael Jackson on FM stations. I'm glad I had something to do with it. Hey, who knows," he laughs, "one day I might want some dance lessons. He owes me one!"

He lapses into another silence and stares at the floor. "I'm sorry, what were we talking about? Oh yeah, I don't do anything for money. I mean, (his brother, the band's drummer) Alex and I were brought up to realise that you gotta eat sh*t before you know what a steak tastes like. My father was 42 years old when he left Holland, came to Pasadena, California with $15 and a piano. He was a professional, cookin', smoking' f**kin' clarinet-sax player and he had to walk six miles every morning to wash dishes to pay the rent. He didn't even know the language! That taught me that if you got the will you can do anything you want. Anything!

"People say to me: 'Oh, you're so talented, you're so gifted'. Do you know what the gift or talent is? The will to do, to focus on something. Anybody can do what I do if they're obsessed in the manner that I am. I didn't pop outta my mom with a piano or a keyboard or a guitar…"

Picture credits: Mogwai73 (left), Samboob (top, right) and digboston (bottom right)

“I’M STILL A KID IN THE PLAYGROUND AND THAT’S THE WAY I APPROACH MUSIC”

He loses his thread. “I’m rambling again… I’m sorry.”

The weird thing is, Eddie should surely be on an all-time high at the moment, the band’s mighty *Jump* off their latest LP *1984* has just topped the US mainstream charts for five solid weeks, it’s a hit all over the world and the video is in heavy rotation on MTV. Is this not cause for celebration?

“Well, it was written two, maybe three years ago,” says Eddie, dismissively. “But I was told that people wouldn’t like seeing me play keyboards because I’m meant to be guitar hero Joe Bitch! I disagreed so eventually I just did it. I get frustrated because I have so many things I wanna do, that I wanna get out. I don’t give a f**k if they sell, if people like it or not. I just wanna goddam get it out of me. It’s like taking a p*ss – my bladder’s hurting, I just want it out.

Keeping it normal

“There are sides of me that people don’t know. They think I’m Joe Guitarist. I’m as much of a geek as anyone else. I’m insecure. I cry. I get happy. I get horny. Everything! I mean, I hate to blow anyone’s fantasy, but I’m just normal.”

I beg to differ. It’s not everyone who can invent a whole new way of playing guitar.

“Well,” he smiles, “I’m obsessed with the sh*t. I love playing with anyone who’ll let me and if no one will, I’ll sit in a room by myself and play. It sounds a very selfish attitude but that piece of wood will never f**k me in the ass, d’you know what I mean? The wife gets uptight. She goes: ‘You love that more than you do me’. And I go: ‘Well, in a way, yes’. Y’know, I can’t f**k my guitar, the three-quarter inch holes are too little, too small but… I’m rambling again. Sorry. What were we talking about?”

Guitars.

“Ah, y’know, there’s not another guitarist in the world that I like besides Clapton. I got the pleasure of meeting him about two months ago, and I was so nervous that I got so drunk, I just blew it…” He sighs, then says, “I think he understood.” He doesn’t sound too sure.

“If there’s anybody on earth that I’d love to sit down and just spend five minutes talking or playing with, it would be Clapton.”

That’s odd, I say. Clapton’s burned out and over the hill and hasn’t recorded anything decent in ages. This gets Eddie angry.

“That’s not true! People can say the same about me. People change. I’m no better now than I was 10 years ago, I’m just different.”

I wonder if he considers his famous solos expressive exercises or virtuoso showcases?

“I’m not showing off or anything,” he insists. “I feel it’s my chance to do whatever the hell I wanna do and every night it’s different. Sometimes things don’t go right. We grade each show. Tonight’s was only six instead of 10+. But when it’s right, it’s the most euphoric feeling. It’s like sex, except different. I mean, I think I’m unique as a guitarist. I do weird, twisted sh*t on a guitar that hasn’t been done before. It gets me going. I’m still a kid in the playground and that’s the way I approach music. Music is nothing but a feeling, an emotion, an expression. Everything I write is part of me, it really is. I read reviews of *Jump* or people tell me, ‘Hey, that’s a great pop tune’. Kiss my ass! It ain’t a pop tune. It’s just goddam music! I hate categorising anything.”

I say it’s usually the lyrics that lead people to put songs into categories to which Eddie says: “This may sound f**ked, but to tell you the honest God truth I don’t even know a lot of the lyrics to our songs. Dave writes ’em and I’m just not into that. I hate books. I don’t read. I barely made it through school. I wouldn’t be playing as twisted as I do if I went by the book.”

The band’s road manager appears and tells me time’s up but Eddie, bless him, says that he’s enjoying himself and is there any booze left to take back to the hotel. The road manager goes off to see and Eddie asks if England likes *Jump*?

I tell him we do and we have a little chat about the difference between American audiences and British ones. “You change styles like I change my underwear,” he says. “It’s almost like you don’t really get into the music, you get into the trip of it, what it stands for, what it means.”

I try to explain why attitude is of utmost importance, but he’s having none of it.

“To me it’s not. Classical music. What are you gonna call Beethoven or Tchaikovsky? One’s punk? One’s heavy metal? It’s just music!”

I venture that what he considers “fads” serve two functions – it flushes out the clones that clog up the charts after any original artist makes an impact, and it also provides the fans with a fun, if fake, revolt against yesterday’s fashion. It’s an enforced credibility gap.

“That’s what makes me sick,” he says. “I haven’t changed my hair in the last 10 years. I see no reason to. The way I am and the way I play and the music I make shouldn’t come across by the way I look…”

He trails off: “I don’t know what the f**k I’m talking about.”

The road manager returns with two bottles – one of brandy, one of vodka.

“I’ll take that one.” Eddie reaches for the brandy. “Uh… I’ll take both.

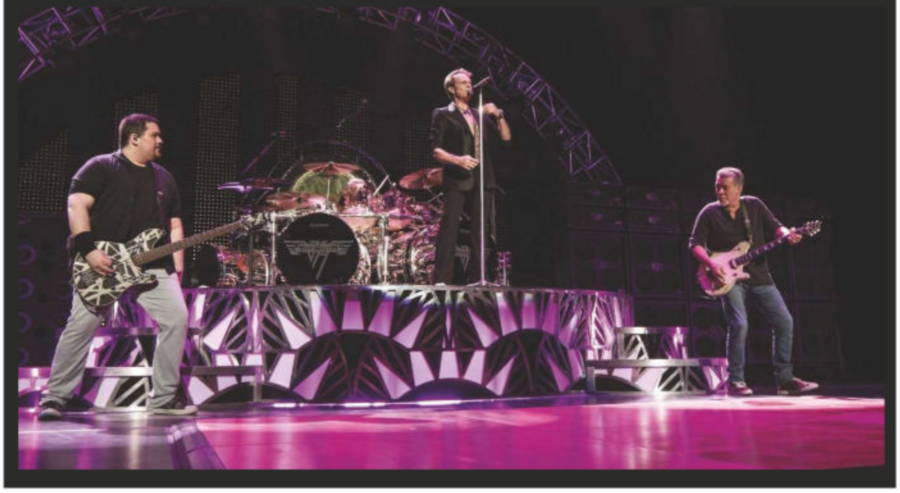
The road manager frowns, long and hard. “You know the rules,” he says. “One per…”

“Uh, ok. I’ll take that,” says Eddie, grabbing the vodka. He grins: “It’s a bigger bottle!”

His parting shot as he staggers out the door is, I kid you not: “I guess I’m mentally and physically healthier now than I’ve ever been” ●

AFTERMATH…

Eddie Van Halen (below, right) died in 2020 from a stroke after several battles with cancer. He was 65.



REASONS TO BE CHEERFUL

Exciting things coming your way in the month ahead

TREVOR HORN
adventures in modern recording
FROM ABC TO ZTT
INTO BATTLE WITH THE ART OF NOISE
FRANKIE GOES TO HOLLYWOOD
TWO TRIBES
PAUL McCARTNEY
FLOWERS IN THE DIRT
ACE JONES
SLAVE TO THE RHYTHM
LEFT TO MY OWN DEVICES

1 STUDIO STORIES

Adventures in Modern Recording: From ABC to ZTT is a new book by ace Eighties producer Trevor Horn, dealing with his many stints in the studio with "a who's who of intelligent modern pop", including ABC, Frankie Goes to Hollywood, Paul McCartney, Rod Stewart, Pet Shop Boys, Seal, Simple Minds, Grace Jones and Yes among many others. Told through the prism of 23 of his most important songs, it: "transports readers into the heart of the studio to witness the making of some of music's most memorable moments, from the Buggles' ground-breaking *Video Killed The Radio Star* to Band Aid's *Do They Know It's Christmas?"* It's published by Nine Eight Books and costs just over £18 on Amazon.

2 IN THE GROOVE

Rhino, the vinyl reissue expert, is launching a new premium vinyl series Rhino High-Fidelity, kicking off with two releases: John Coltrane's 1964 *Coltrane's Sound* and The Cars self-titled 1978 debut.

The idea is that the record label will release two classic albums each quarter, limited to 5,000 numbered copies. To ensure consistent sonic excellence, the company has employed legendary mastering engineer Kevin Gray who will cut lacquers for all Rhino Hi-Fi releases, and Optimal will press the 180g vinyl records. All releases will come in high-quality glossy covers and "tip-on" jackets, "an old-school aesthetic that evokes the golden age of vinyl".

All releases will include exclusive content. *The Cars* features a new interview with guitarist Elliot Easton about the gear used on the album, plus producer Roy Thomas Baker's tracking notes for *Good Times Roll*. *Coltrane's Sound* includes notes and images from the master tapes along with an archival essay by legendary producer Tom Dowd, the recording engineer on this album, and hundreds of other classics on Atlantic Records

coltrane's sound
HE PLAYED WITH FEATHERS

THE UK HI-FI SHOW *LIVE* IS BACK WITH TONS OF HIGH-END AUDIO PRODUCTS

3 THE GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH

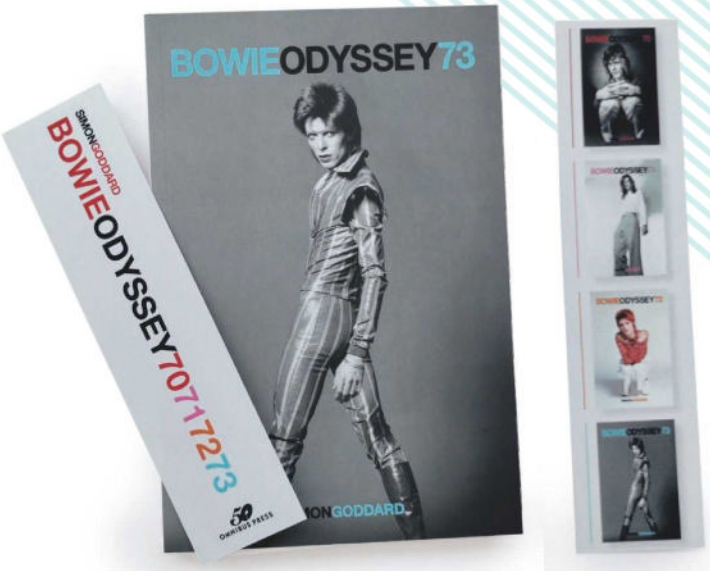
A definite date for your diary. The UK Hi-Fi Show *Live* returns to Ascot Racecourse Grandstand this Autumn with tons of high-end audio products on demonstration, a panoramic headphone zone, hi-fi workshops, a giant vinyl record fair and much more. Dates are Friday 29 September (invited trade, press and guests), Saturday 30 September and Sunday 1 October for one and all. For more info, updates and ticket sales go to: hifishowlive.com

4 DEVOTIONAL

A Song And A Prayer: 30 Devotions Inspired by My Favorite Songs is a new book by the late country music star Loretta Lynn, co-authored by artist and ordained minister Doctor Kim McLean. It was written just before her death last October and the blurb says it's: "a collection of prayers combined with song lyrics inspired by Lynn's writing sessions with McLean". It's available via Worthy Books priced at £20.

5 BOWIE ANNUAL

Bowie expert Simon Goddard has set himself the task of writing a book about every year of the great man's heady career. This is the fourth volume entitled *Bowie Odyssey 73* and charts the year when he retired Ziggy Stardust, turned his back on glam rock and, the blurb says, took the: "mainline



to the dark heart of Seventies sex, drugs and debauched rock 'n' roll." Published by Omnibus, it costs just over £13 on Amazon.

6 CAMBS PODCAST

Cambridge Audio has launched a new podcast series, *Made By Music*, featuring exclusive interviews with music icons from across the generations. The press release says that in each episode, host Sean Hannam will get: "up close and personal with guests to discuss key moments from their lives, in particular the records that shaped and influenced them, songs from the artists' back catalogue, plus an ultimate Music Moment".

The first three episodes feature interviews with Pink Floyd bassist Guy Pratt, Boy George and Norman Cook – aka Fatboy Slim. All three are on Spotify now with further episodes dropping fortnightly. The link is: bit.ly/madebymusic

CAMBRIDGE
MADE BY MUSIC
PODCAST

RHINO WILL BE RELEASING TWO CLASSIC ALBUMS EACH QUARTER

7 STACKS OF STAX

Written in Their Soul: The Stax Songwriter Demos is a seven-disc boxset including 146 demos (140 previously unreleased) from Stax's legendary roster of songwriters, including Bettye Crutcher, Homer Banks and William Bell. From early sketches of classic Sixties and Seventies hits to never-before-heard songs with full-blown arrangements, *Written In Their Soul* offers a fascinating glimpse behind the scenes of the storied Memphis label. The featured songs fall into three categories: demos that were released by artists at Stax or its subsidiary imprints, including Volt, We Produce and Enterprise (CDs 1–3); demos by Stax songwriters that were released by artists on other labels, such as Atlantic and Decca (CD 4); and a trove of hit-worthy recordings that were never released (CDs 5–7). Artists include Carla Thomas, Eddie Floyd, The Staple Singers, Rufus Thomas, Booker T Jones and Frederick Knight. All this gold dust is available on Amazon for £82.

HEADY DAZE
THE MISSION YEARS 1985-1990
WAYNE HUSSEY
HEADY DAZE
SPECIAL EDITION CD

8 MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

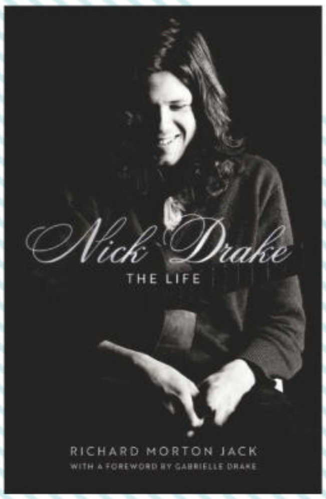
"Eskimo!!!!" If you recognise that call to arms, you're still in touch with your adolescent Goth and will be delighted to know that *Heady Daze, The Mission Years 1985-1990* has just been published by Omnibus. The second of lead Missionary Wayne Hussey's hilariously fuzzy recollections of his glory days at the helm of the band, it's available as a paperback and costs about 15 quid on Amazon

9 REMIX MASTER

Arthur Baker Presents Dance Masters: Arthur Baker The Classic Dance Remixes is a massive collection featuring 43 songs charting the career of the man who introduced rock music to remixes including many long out-of-print 12in versions and previously unavailable mixes.

Available in July, the eclectic set features a wide array of selections from the likes of Cyndi Lauper's *Girls Just Want To Have Fun* and Neneh Cherry's *Buffalo Stance* to the superb *Planet Rock* with Afrika Bambaataa & Soulsonic Force.

The set is presented as a four-CD boxset and comes bundled with a 32-page book featuring previously unseen photos. The collection is also available as six-LP and two-LP sets. Different versions are available via Amazon priced between £30 and £35.



10 FOLK HERO

There are a fair few books about Nick Drake, but the forthcoming *Nick Drake: The Life* by Richard Morton Jack is the only biography of the singer/songwriter to be written with the blessing and involvement of his estate. The pre-publication blurb says it draws on copious original research and new interviews with family, friends and collaborators, as well as deeply personal archive material unavailable to previous writers – including his father's diaries, his essays and private correspondence. "This," it concludes, "is the most comprehensive and authoritative account possible of Nick's short and enigmatic life."

It's published by John Murray, includes a foreword by the singer's sister, actor Gabrielle Drake, and over 75 photos – many rare or previously unseen. Amazon is selling it now for £26.40.

WRITTEN IN THEIR SOUL:
THE STAX SONGWRITER DEMOS

Next Month

KESTREL AUDIO KT-200 TURNTABLE

Our reviewer says: "A very impressive debut deck from Kestrel Audio... an extremely well made and finished turntable with no obvious vices – one that looks great and sounds as good as can be expected at this price." Read more about this brilliant new £900 bargain deck next month...

ALSO:

REVIEWS Airpulse A300Pro active speaker, Sonos Era 300 multi-room speaker, Zorloo ZuperDAC Max headphone amp, Edwards Audio Apprentice phono stage, English Acoustics Stereo 21c power amplifier plus a *Group Test* of red-hot new turntables.

FEATURES *Music Legends*, *Music Reviews*, Reasons To Be Cheerful, our comprehensive *Buyer's Guide* and sharp-as-nails *Opinions* pieces, the *Flashback* interview, *Beginner's Guide* all the latest kit release news in *Audiofile* and your hi-fi queries answered by our experts.

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